

Environmental Observation & Assessment  
Residential Programs & Services

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**Introduction**

Residential Programs & Services (RPS) is home to 13 residence halls and 11 apartment complexes that create Indiana University's (IU) on-campus living experience. With the temporary closing/renovation of two residence halls, RPS came to an agreement with three off-campus apartment complexes to provide housing options for students; Park on Morton, Reserve on Third, and Smallwood are known as RPS' leased off-campus apartments (LOCA). RPS' mission is to "create life-changing experiences by building relationships, developing others, and creating a sense of belonging for our students, their families and the IU community" (About RPS, 2019). RPS' holistic approach to student development is facilitated through the implementation of its residential curriculum that is designed to "educate, empower, and engage residents" (Residential Curriculum, 2019).



*Picture A: A front view of the residential hall that I supervise*

Within the department, I serve as a Graduate Supervisor (GS) for a residence hall located in the southeast neighborhood known as Read Residence Center/Read Hall. I oversee the work that the Resident Assistants (RAs) and CommUNITY Educator (CUE) provide the building community, and I preserve the welfare of the building alongside Read's professional staff Leadership Team (LT). I play many roles within the building that includes, but is not limited to: working the center desk, advising the performing arts thematic floor, serving as a conduct hearing officer, and simply maintaining an active presence within the building community; I additionally serve in an on-call rotation within the southeast neighborhood to help manage emergency situations such as access malfunctions, substance abuse, and troubleshooting questions.

I have noted that the culture of my work environment gets heavily impacted by who is serving in the various leadership roles that are present. RPS is committed to embracing diversity within its residential hall community, so it will be beneficial to see how RPS supports/does not support this claim. For my observations within my assistantship, I will be focusing on the human aggregate environment and the cultural familiarity indicator from the CECE model.

### Human Aggregate



*Picture B: Bulletin board in Read's lobby that showcases the student staff and LT of the building*

The culture of an environment can be heavily shaped by the people who inhabit it, as the collective of their characteristics outlines the dominant features that are within it (Strange & Banning, 2015). As different people in leadership roles enter RPS, their influence spreads into the different spheres that they oversee. The department as a whole is no stranger to transition, with Read being a building that is home to various shifts in staffing personnel in the year that I have served. I have seen my building cycle through five full-time Residential Life Coordinators (RLCs), I have seen the influence of four GSs on the overall work culture (including myself), and I have seen how over 30 student staff members (Desk Assistants (DAs), CUE, and RAs) all play a role in influencing the various subcultures that are present. When people create an environment, they have an impact on how others are attracted and satisfied with the space that they are in (Strange & Banning, 2015). While the student staff remains more of a constant as the year progresses, there have been a wide variety of RLCs that enter the building with their own unique approach to the job. With the different supervisors that have cycled in and out of Read, their different work styles are layers of influence that shapes morale within the building.

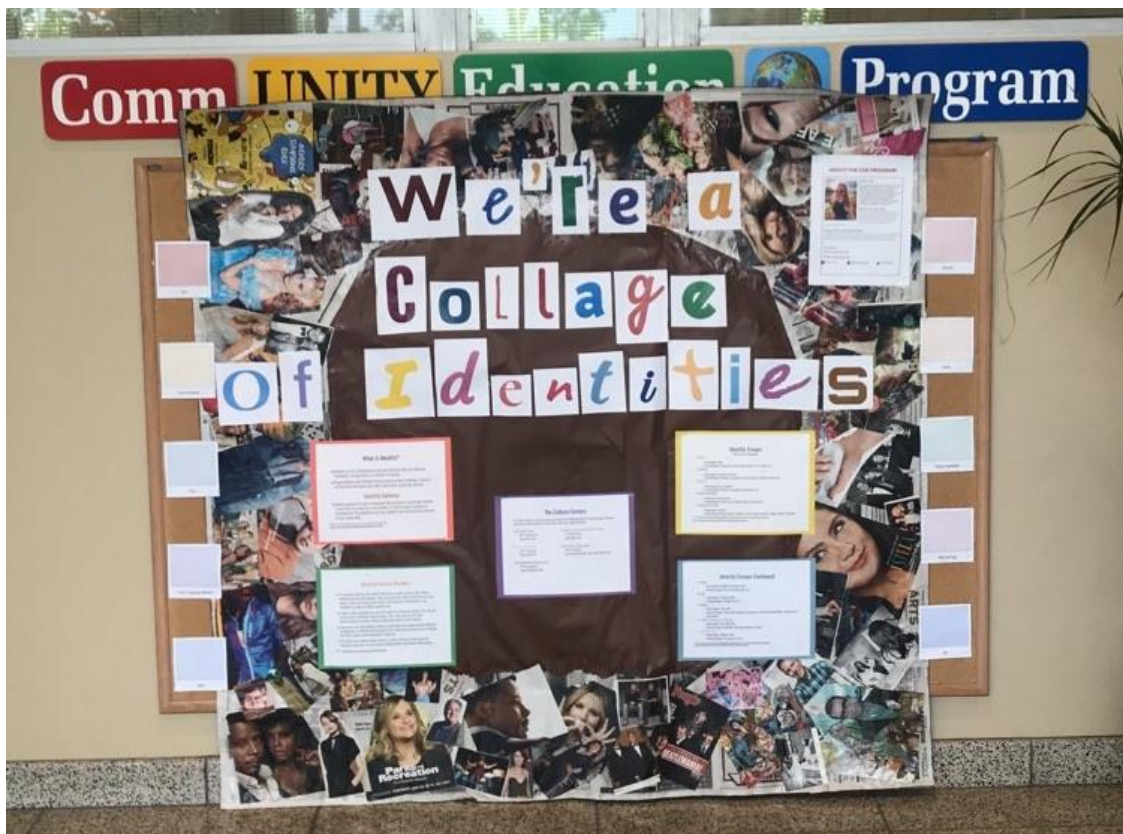
*Pictures C, D, & E, along with 2 pages of content have been redacted from this work for confidentiality purposes.*

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### **Cultural Familiarity**

The Culturally Engaging Campus Environments (CECE) theoretical model aims to highlight a variety of conditions that guides diverse populations of students to success in collegiate environments. The CECE model “incorporates the voices of diverse populations into its explanation of success in college” (Museus, 2014, p. 207) and dives into deeper dimensions that play a role into the success of (primarily) students of color. IU can be viewed as a predominantly white institution (PWI) that can be challenging for students of color to navigate. The United States has historically denied people of color the language or means to express their oppression (Museus & Jayakumar, 2012), but environments that raise cultural familiarity to the surface can serve as spaces that allow students with diverse backgrounds to feel more acknowledged. Cultural Familiarity within the CECE model relates to the extent that “college students have opportunities to physically connect with faculty, staff, and peers with whom they share common backgrounds on their respective campuses (Museus, 2014, p. 210), which is associated with a greater likelihood of collegiate success. An increase in cultural familiarity could increase in the ability to express counter-storytelling, which can be seen as methods of expression to “expose, analyze and/or challenge the dominant stories and discourse that reinforces privilege and power that has historically been denied to marginalized groups” (Museus & Jayakumar, 2012, p 35).



*Picture F: Bulletin Board that was designed by Read's CUE, with the aim of highlighting how we are in an environment with a wide variety of identities that interact with each other*

“The CommUNITY Education Program, or CUE Program for short, is an educational experience focused on shaping our [IU’s] residential environment to be a place of learning and growth related to identity, diversity, inclusion, and social justice” (CUE Program, 2019, para 1). CUEs “creates and implements educational experiences for residents in their residence center related to identity, diversity, inclusion, and social justice” (CUE Program, 2019, para 2). These experiences are tied to RPS’ general learning goals and learning outcomes.

Read’s CUE has done a fantastic job at engaging the student staff of the building and implementing learning opportunities that the community can benefit from. Her intentional engagements with each individual student staff member (which is a mapping of four salient identities that one carries) serves as great reflection tool to understand how different identities impact relationships within a team, and within the collegiate environment. The bulletin boards and other programming efforts that CUEs implement within their building can serve as a space where students with marginalized identities feel heard, and as a medium through which narratives on marginalized students can rise to the surface. It’s challenging having one staff member engage a large audience on their own, so empowering the RAs of each residence hall to advocate and stand alongside the work of the CUE is a proactive measure that RPS can implement to increase support for this staff member.



*Picture G: A sign that hangs in Forest’s 6<sup>th</sup> floor of it’s a Tower. This is home to the Luis Dávila Latinx Thematic Community. “Luis Dávila was a Professor in Latin American and Latino Literature at Indiana University, Bloomington” (Luis Dávila, 2019, para 1).*

A space that is worth noting that is not located within Read, is the Luis Dávila Latinx Thematic Floor. This thematic floor is designed to create a community where Latinx students feel safe, and where they (and other non-Latinx identifying students) can immerse themselves in the history, culture, politics and experiences of Latinx diaspora (Luis Dávila, 2019). This is a community where Latinx students can feel more like their authentic selves and where they can express their perspectives on how the PWI environment feels. These counter-stories that are being shared can help “build a community among marginalized groups and strengthen the social, political, and cultural survival and resistance traditions” (Museus & Jayakumar, 2012, p. 35) on the floor.

This floor serves as an escape from the PWI environment for most students and it’s a place where students can be in community with people that look like them (J.D. Melendez, RA Gala, personal communication, September 2019); the community was established during the Fall of 2017 to better increase Latinx identifying students’ sense of belonging within the IU residential hall community, and to help them feel more cared for/seen (Luis Dávila, 2019).

### **Person-Environment Interaction Analysis**

My assistantship has opened my eyes to the power that I have as an individual to influence the environment that I’m in. I gradually ask myself the following questions throughout my various experiences within these environments: “How am I actively shaping the environment that I’m in?”, “What actions am I participating in to either enhance or diminish the overall space?”, and “What are some ideas that I can bring to the table to create a new spark within the environment?” These questions serve as guiding points through my experience since my assistantship is being actively shaped by the people and the conditions that interact with it. Some of these actions can be answered using the examples below.



*Picture H: A t-shirt design that I created during the Summer of 2018 using Photoshop. These shirts were created for all student leaders within the Read community, and these shirts are still being actively worn by the current staff. I had enough leftover shirts to give to new staff student staff from this year.*



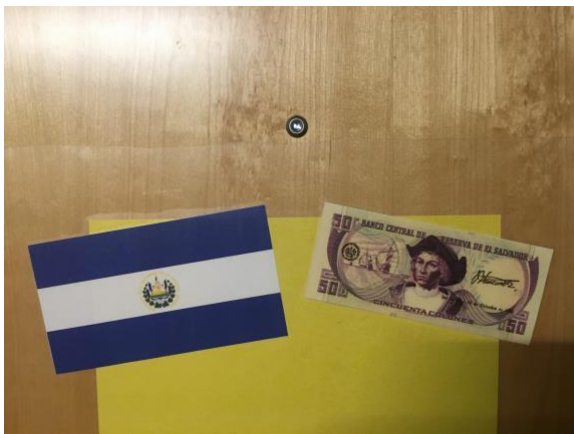
*Picture 1: Buttons that I created for the student staff and LT of Read. Each button has a theme for the year that I thought of and I want to pass on to the staff. My theme for Read's 2018-2019 year was "Hustle", and the theme that I gave the staff for the 2019-2020 year was "Inspire." Staff members were encouraged to think about what each word means to them, and to then apply it into their daily work.*

The presence that I bring to Read is rooted in my personal philosophy: to create welcoming spaces (large, small, personal, etc.) where I make the best effort to help folks feel included, comfortable, and enthusiastic to be present. I believe maintaining a healthy active presence within my role is important since it helps my student staff know that support is around them if there is a need for it. My office isn't limited to an actual room, I view it as the entire building since my service can come at any moment. I always conduct my office hours next to the center desk area so that staff and residents see that I am around to assist if needed.

My approach was seen as foreign to some of the student staff in my first year, since they would compare me the male grad before me. According to some of my RAs, the male grad before me was detached from the role and was only present to the staff during team meetings and when it was a requirement to be seen (RA 4, personal communication, February 2019). The difference in our levels of engagement shook the staff and planted the idea in their heads that I am a different kind of professional; my style is now something that is greatly appreciated in my second year of service. I always aim to present my active presence with a warm and welcoming feel to it, which



I believe increases the satisfaction and attraction of staff members within the environment. I've had several staff members tell me that they trust me and that they are glad that I'm here with them since they feel the most support from me. "Thank you for your support of me and the whole team!" (Read CUE, personal communication, October 20, 2019). As one of the most consistent staff members within my building, I acknowledge the comforting/reassuring presence that I bring to several of my staff members. Returning staff (both professional and student) see the care and efforts that I put into my work, and they acknowledge that I am a critical piece in the overall morale/stability of the building (J.D. Melendez, personal communication, September 2019). I use my strategic thinking and relationship building Clifton strength from Picture C to productively apply it to the environment that I'm in (Strange & Banning, 2015).



*Pictures J & K: Door decorations that highlight currency from the countries of El Salvador and Honduras. There is also a poster for a public talk event that civil rights activist Dolores Huerta presented in September of this year.*

My involvement with the Luis Davila Thematic community started this year, and it has been a beneficial experience for both the students in that floor and for myself. One of my RAs in Read interns with the La Casa Latino Culture Center, where she spends time on the thematic floor creating programs for the students as part of her work responsibilities. The RA of the thematic floor and my own RA invited me to visit the floor whenever I can so that I can be in community with the rest of the floor and since they believe that bringing more culture to the floor can be beneficial to all. The RAs that brought me in identify as Latina, while I identify as Latino; the addition of Latino leadership among the floor has been an empowering sight to see (RA Gala, personal communication, October 2019). It feels nice seeing Honduras and El Salvador as some of the first countries represented on the floor since that is my personal heritage.



*Picture L: A motivational quote that translates to “Dale, You Can Do It!” (there’s no English translation for Dale). I made this picture using Photoshop in October of this year to motivate myself, and I then printed out this picture to pass out to Latinx identifying students and the Luis Dávila community with the idea of cultural familiarity in the back of my head. I am going to be printing some for the La Casa Culture Center soon.*

As I reflect on how my identity has impacted these various spaces within RPS, I remind myself that my presence and the conditions that I create play a huge factor in the spaces that I shape as an upcoming full-time professional. As a full-time professional, I aim to co-create environments alongside all the various agents that I serve with that encourages students to seek their greatest potential in their personal and professional crafts. I intend to approach job interviews with the acknowledgement that I bring a wide variety of experiences that can have an effect on the different spaces that I enter, and that I recognize the power that students themselves bring in shaping the environment.

I believe having a conversation with my future student staff(s) on how our individual/collective presence impacts the work environment that we serve could be a beneficial exercise for us all. The goal would be to talk about what we each bring to the table, and to then visualize how our characteristics could influence the environment that we share. As we shape the spaces that we enter, the environment influences us in return (Strange & Banning, 2015). Co-creating an environment alongside my community that awakens the best within students and all community participants will always be present in the foundation of my professional point of view.

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