

MACEWAN RESIDENCE SERVICES: A RISKY ACCOMMODATION?

Mike Annett and Dana Dzivinski wrote this case solely to provide material for class discussion. The authors do not intend to illustrate either effective or ineffective handling of a managerial situation. The authors may have disguised certain names and other identifying information to protect confidentiality.

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In late November 2014, Clint Galloway, the director of Residence Services at MacEwan University (MacEwan), in the province of Alberta, Canada, was about to make his employee selection for a residence assistant (RA) position. The new hire would replace a vacancy due to a recent employee resignation. The full selection process had just concluded, and one of the top candidates was Mikayla Benson. She and two other candidates were deemed equal in their overall qualifications. Benson was stronger in some regards, but the other candidates were stronger in other areas. These differences were not material to the role, so all three candidates could be successful in the position.

One significant consideration was that Benson used a wheelchair, which meant that functional and structural accommodations would be required for her. Galloway leaned toward hiring Benson because of his own personal values of diversity and inclusive employment. The fact that the *Alberta Human Rights Act*¹ prohibited employment discrimination on the basis of a disability unless a bona fide occupational requirement was present also helped direct Galloway's thinking (see Exhibit 1). However, Galloway also recognized that his values of inclusiveness and affirmative action could lead him toward several issues: (a) engaging in reverse discrimination for the other candidates, (b) minimizing the need to hire an RA that could fully respond to an emergency situation, and (c) making a choice that unnecessarily increased his supervisory load.

Choosing the other candidates meant that Galloway would not need to worry about their physical capacity to respond to emergency situations. He would also avoid potential negative reactions from his team or student clients regarding working with a person with disabilities. MacEwan's human resources vision appeared to be silent on the matter of diversity and inclusive employment, which was of little help to Galloway. Wanting to make a right and responsible choice, and recognizing that preventing, minimizing, and solving problems was one of his responsibilities, Galloway began work on his task. He reviewed signals from legislation, his values, and the organization's practices, and then drafted a list of problems that could arise from hiring and from not hiring Benson.

¹ Alberta Human Rights Act, RSA 2000, c. A-25.5, accessed November 16, 2016, www.qp.alberta.ca/documents/Acts/A25P5.pdf.

RESIDENCE SERVICES

Organizational Overview

MacEwan's Residence Services had offered apartment-style accommodations since 2005. The 13-storey structure had three wings, housed up to 878 students in various room configurations, and contained several common entertainment or social rooms plus amenities. Unit rental rates ranged from US\$4,000² to \$5,500 per term, depending on the room configuration (bachelor, two-bedroom, or four-bedroom). In addition to the core deliverable service—accommodation—Residence Services worked to help students experience an intellectually and socially stimulating environment that supported academic achievement, personal development, and healthy lifestyle practices.

To operate the building and deliver mission-fulfilling programs and services, Residence Services maintained a workforce of approximately 50 positions. Seven of these positions (e.g., director, accounting technician, and housing coordinator) were permanent and supported the overall direction and long-term functioning of Residence Services. These roles were performed by non-student employees. The remaining positions were temporary (e.g., RA, residence programmer, and front desk attendant), and were performed by student employees (see Exhibit 2).

Director of Residence Services

Galloway joined Residence Services as director in 2008. He had eight years of related experience in supporting students in academic and residential environments. Galloway also held a master's degree in student affairs in higher education. Galloway strongly believed in an inclusive society and found it easy to create opportunities for others to become involved in work situations, social activities, or personal connections. Over the previous few years, Galloway had created several customized jobs in Residence Services that enabled students with more challenging disabilities (e.g., cerebral palsy and autism) to obtain part-time paid work experience. Those employees were supported by job coaches provided by a third-party agency. The job duties were typically related to filing and data administration, and were performed in the back office. When Galloway hired his staff, he looked for people who could perform effectively in their role and make strong contributions to the welcoming and empowering culture of Residence Services.

Residence Assistant Position

The RA position reported to the resident life coordinator and was oriented to the following vision: "To provide an exceptional student experience, within which an individual will feel heard, valued, respected, and supported. We believe that any person who walks through the doors of MacEwan University Residence deserves a positive experience and an opportunity to engage in their own personal growth and development" (see Exhibit 3).

The job description also noted that the RA was responsible for providing "a diverse and comprehensive residence program in Edmonton, Alberta, where residents will gain the necessary skills to enhance themselves, their peers, and overall community, which are essential components of their present and future success" (see Exhibit 3). As part of this role, the RA was mainly expected to create and deliver programs and act as early interveners for floor issues and emergencies.

² All currency amounts are in US\$ unless otherwise specified.

As a “position with authority” in residence, the RA would be seen as a source of stability for students, capable of resolving conflict and responding to student concerns and facility emergencies. This position required approximately 15–20 hours of service per week to perform to satisfactory levels and have meaningful impact, but the work was not formally scheduled. Rather, the RA acted or served when programs were offered or student support needs arose. RAs lived in the residence and were given discounts on their accommodations as part of their compensation. In the second year of employment, RAs were additionally provided a small monthly stipend.

EMPLOYEE SELECTION

Selection Process

Candidates for the position were solicited through notice boards in the residence common areas and on the MacEwan corporate website. Advertisements outlined the key duties of the role, including (a) serving as a role model and helping students adjust to university life, (b) documenting any incidents and violations (but not assessing sanctions), and (c) sharing responsibility for building security. Additionally, the advertisement noted that training would be provided for all job duties, including peer counselling, mediation, first aid, leadership, and more.

Positions within Residence Services were normally appointed through a competitive process. Occasionally, non-competitive appointments were made for reasons of operational effectiveness (e.g., reappointments after term completions) and socially inclusive reasons (e.g., job development opportunities for persons with developmental disabilities). Residence Services strove to build a workforce that reflected the student community it served, but it did not have an active or prescriptive diversity policy to uphold. The vision and mission of MacEwan’s human resources focused on the importance of developing a challenging, diverse, and fulfilling workplace built on quality and engaged staff (see Exhibit 4).

The selection process for the RA position typically involved the following steps:

- Initial screening of resume applications by the selection team
- Invited interviews, which followed an approach of rotation through multiple stations, with each station having an assigned selection team member and topic
- Reference checks with a prior employer by a member of the selection team
- Communication of top candidates by the selection team to the director of Residence Services
- Offer presentation to the selected candidate and negotiation by the director of Residence Services

The volume of applications for the RA position varied from one posting to the next, but commonly 30–50 applicants received initial consideration, and 10–15 were seriously considered. Typically, five Residence Services staff members were involved in the selection process; sometimes, a human resources representative was also involved. The final selection decision was made by the director, informed by the input from other process participants.

The selection process usually took place during the winter months (November to February), with orientation and employment for the next academic year beginning in late summer. The timing was planned to secure the RA before the break for the spring and summer months, when many students left the campus. At the same time, any immediate vacancies were filled to replace RAs who resigned from Residence Services after the fall semester. The RA’s role was flexible and somewhat dependent on the characteristics of both the incumbent and the students being served. Occasionally, RAs decided that the position was not what they

had envisioned and chose not to continue or complete their assignment. Benson applied for a position that started in January 2015.

The number of RA positions was relatively consistent, at about 17 annually. This was possible because occupancy rates were fairly static during the main education semesters (fall and winter) and 17 RAs provided suitable coverage for the students, at one or two RAs per floor. The number of RAs that needed to be hired that year was forecasted at nine people; the actual number hired depended on the return rate of prior year RAs. Based on the natural retention cycle, about 50 per cent of RAs returned for a second set of semesters; some RAs exited early, after one semester of service; and some RAs stayed on for a second or third academic year. The employment cycle of RAs generally worked well for Residence Services. It supported consistency and maturing of the RAs, while accommodating students' flexible and evolving employment interests.

Selection Considerations

The RA role carried significant responsibility and authority to help support the well-being of students and maintain the quality, safety, and positive experience of residence life. When making a selection decision, the director of Residence Services weighed a number of considerations, including the following three requirements:

- The candidate's competency and personal suitability to develop and deliver programming and to engage meaningfully with student residents (e.g., leadership ability and listening skills)
- The candidate's capacity for issues management, to help address or deter various presentations of harm to student residents (e.g., unsafe activities or exuberant parties)
- The candidate's emergency response capacity, to help student residents respond appropriately to dangers (e.g., intruders, assaults, or fire or emergency evacuation)

In terms of frequency of events, the RA was most commonly called upon to use professional abilities for delivering programming and connecting with student residents. Occasionally, the management of issues was called upon, and more rarely, emergency response actions were needed. However, in preceding years, events at other universities and student residences suggested that safety and well-being were increasing and serious concerns.³ Fortunately, at MacEwan's student residences there had only been minor issues and no significant emergencies or intrusions, but the probability seemed to be increasing each year. Therefore, the director had to be cognizant of all three elements of the RA role and of the consequences of failure or non-performance.

IMMINENT DECISION

Galloway was at a clear decision point. The other members of the selection process agreed that Benson had the competencies and personal qualities necessary to perform the major portions of the RA position. However, Galloway needed to strongly consider whether Benson had the capacity to act effectively in an

³ Rob Trip, "Student Found Dead at Queen's University Residence," *The Whig*, September 13, 2012, accessed June 1, 2016, www.thewhig.com/2010/09/13/student-found-dead-at-queens-university-residence; Josh Visser, "Ontario University Working to Remove Disturbing Video After Student Sets Fire in Apparent Online Suicide Attempt," *The National Post*, December 2, 2013, accessed June 1, 2016, <http://news.nationalpost.com/news/canada/ontario-university-dorm-evacuated-after-student-sets-himself-on-fire-in-apparent-online-suicide-attempt>; Laura Kane, "Rape Victim's Ordeal with University of Saskatchewan," CBC News, November 21, 2014, accessed June 1, 2016, www.cbc.ca/news/canada/british-columbia/attempted-break-in-at-student-lounge-prompts-ubc-warning-1.3518361.

emergency situation or deter an intruder. That is, could she perform the complete job? Galloway also wondered if his duty to accommodate was outweighed by bona fide occupational requirements.

In addition, Galloway was balancing his own proclivities towards inclusive employment with a sense of corporate responsibility. If Benson became an RA, Galloway would need to authorize several renovation projects to ensure that the office was completely accessible to Benson and her wheelchair. He would also need to modify some of the job duties so that they could be completed from a sitting position. The structural accommodations would require approximately \$3,000 to complete, and the functional accommodations would require the co-operation of a partner RA from time to time. The funding for the accommodations would need to come from a general operating account because no specific budget was allocated for such an accommodation.

In addition to direct accommodations for Benson, there was a potential impact on the day-to-day work of the general team and student residents. The RA needed to interact and work closely with other RAs and students on life and personal growth issues, so Galloway also needed to acknowledge the potential for gains and losses in terms of team and service dynamics.

The selection panel had identified Benson as a suitable candidate, but the final decision and accountability to offer employment was his. However, he had to decide quickly. The candidate needed to be hired and oriented in the next two weeks—before the final exam period and the start of the Christmas break—if the new RA was to be in place for the next semester. The decision to hire or not to hire Benson rested on Galloway.

EXHIBIT 1: ALBERTA HUMAN RIGHTS ACT (EXCERPT)

Discrimination re employment practices

7 (1) No employer shall

- (a) refuse to employ or refuse to continue to employ any person, or
- (b) discriminate against any person with regard to employment or any term or condition of employment,

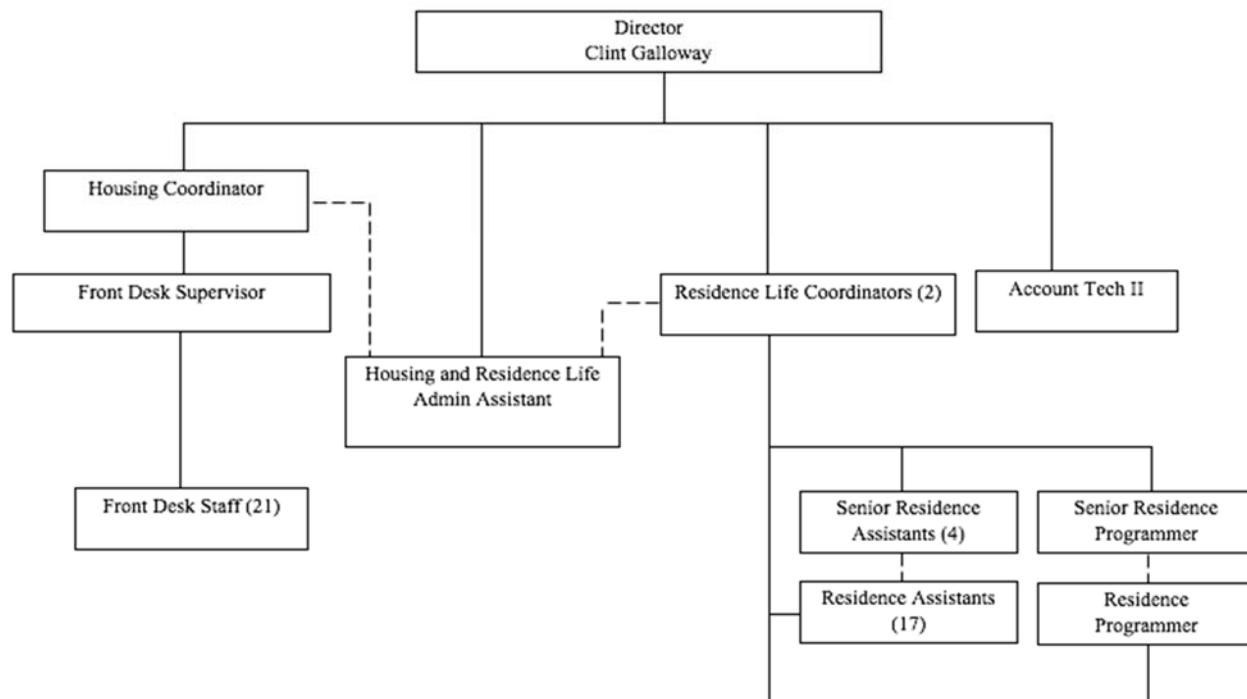
because of the race, religious beliefs, colour, gender, gender identity, gender expression, physical disability, mental disability, age, ancestry, place of origin, marital status, source of income, family status or sexual orientation of that person or of any other person.

(2) Subsection (1) as it relates to age and marital status does not affect the operation of any bona fide retirement or pension plan or the terms or conditions of any bona fide group or employee insurance plan.

(3) Subsection (1) does not apply with respect to a refusal, limitation, specification or preference based on a bona fide occupational requirement.

Source: *Alberta Human Rights Act*, RSA 2000, c. A-25.5, s. 7 (Alberta Queen's Printer), accessed June 1, 2016, www.qp.alberta.ca/documents/Acts/A25P5.pdf.

EXHIBIT 2: MACEWAN UNIVERSITY RESIDENCE SERVICES, ORGANIZATION CHART



Source: Adapted by the author from MacEwan University internal documents.

EXHIBIT 3: RESIDENCE ASSISTANT (RA) POSITION DESCRIPTION

Reports to: Residence Life Coordinator (RLC)
Department: MacEwan University Residence Services

CLEAR EYES. FULL HEARTS. CAN'T LOSE.

MacEwan University Residence Life's mission is to provide a diverse and comprehensive residence program in Edmonton, Alberta, where residents will gain the necessary skills to enhance themselves, their peers, and overall community, which are essential components of their present and future success. We hope to achieve this by working collaboratively with students, faculty, staff, and MacEwan campus partners in creating an engaging and inclusive environment that encourages and provides its members with opportunities to grow into positive and successful global citizens and leaders.

Our vision is to provide an exceptional student experience, within which an individual will feel heard, valued, respected, and supported. We believe that any person who walks through the doors of MacEwan University Residence deserves a positive experience and an opportunity to engage in their own personal growth and development.

ROLE

1. Foster an atmosphere in residence that creates opportunities for community building.
2. Develop and facilitate programs that address the needs of the floor and support the programming model set out by Residence Services.
3. Facilitate a secure foundation for student transition and growth into University life.
4. Ensure that residence policies are upheld and respond to policy violations and emergencies as they arise.
5. Maintain open communication and manage administrative duties.
6. Act as a role model of respect for self, others, and the community.

COMPETENCIES and RESPONSIBILITIES

INTEGRITY – Adhere to a personal moral standard that includes honesty, accountability, compassion, empathy, and a commitment to service. Uphold the professional standards of MacEwan University. Have a general concern for the student experience and their success as learners and residents. Responsibilities include:

- Alert Residence Life Coordinators (RLCs) regarding special needs or concerns of individual residents or problem areas in the building in a timely manner.
- Respond to students who violate community standards and any other Residence and/or University policies or regulations.
- Ensure all policy violations are handled in a consistent and fair manner and report all potential discipline situations to the RLCs.
- Know and understand the referral procedure for assistance (i.e., Mental Health, Campus Security).
- Attend and be on time for all staff and unit meetings.
- Communicate positively and directly with residents and staff, and encourage the same from others.
- Demonstrate academic efforts as a priority of residence life.
- Refrain from behaviours that would undermine this position of leadership.
- Abide by the Residence Community Standards, University policies and regulations, as well as community expectations as decided by floor members.

EXHIBIT 3 (CONTINUED)

ATTITUDE – Have a positive disposition in which outlook and behaviours are aligned with the values of the program. Approach all aspects of the role with enthusiasm and passion. Responsibilities include:

- Encourage and support resident involvement within the building and throughout campus.
- Understand and use resources available for the support and assistance of residents in need.
- Assist residents proactively with their individual and community concerns.

GROWTH – Pursue engaged participation in one's own personal growth and continued learning. Be committed to the ongoing advancement of the staff, team, and Residence Life program as a whole. Responsibilities include:

- Have a solid understanding of the MacEwan Residence Handbook as presented by Residence Services.
- Recognize when situations warrant a call for staff backup.
- Attend all mandatory RLS Leadership Development Institutes.

LEADERSHIP – Represent the Residence Life program values through positive role modelling, peer mentorship, and a maintenance of the highest personal and professional standards at all times. Responsibilities include:

- Coordinate and facilitate monthly community meetings.
- Serve as a resource for programs and options available on campus, and/or seek out appropriate information.
- Encourage involvement of floor members in planning programs/events and available leadership opportunities.
- Share information in a timely manner regarding procedures and important dates to residents (e.g., check out, room changes, add/drop deadline, extended stay registration, etc.).
- Address inappropriate behaviour, its impact on the residence community, and document these incidents within 24 hours.
- Maintain building safety and security within reasonable individual limits, and respond to emergencies as required.
- Understand how and when to activate Campus Security Services and other emergency response units (i.e., Emergency Medical Service, fire department, etc.).
- Notify the RLC On Call and/or the Senior RA On Duty of all major incidents immediately.
- Actively participate in all move-in and move-out related activities.

DEDICATION – Dedicate appropriate time and effort toward fulfilling the goals and objectives of the Residence Life program as well as a demonstrated loyalty to the program and its continued progress. Responsibilities include:

- Establish, develop, and maintain an open relationship with each member of the community. Interact with each member on the floor on a regular basis.
- Be available to residents on the floor.
- Evaluate and adjust programming to the needs of the floor and/or building where appropriate.
- Complete all incident documentation within 24 hours.
- Fulfill on-duty responsibilities including rounds, responding to calls, and handling resident inquiries.
- Report for on-duty shifts on time, according to schedule, and perform all responsibilities as outlined by the RLCs.
- Submit all paperwork and reports in a timely manner.

EXHIBIT 3 (CONTINUED)

- Support programs conducted by fellow staff members, including helping out, promoting, and/or attending these programs.
- Support custodial and maintenance staff, and communicate their role to residents.
- Assist with daily building operations and procedures.
- Check/respond to e-mail and voice mail within 24 hours.
- Conduct building tours and related duties during MacEwan Open House or during other times as assigned.

COMMUNITY – Demonstrate community living through the principles of unity, acceptance, collective responsibility, and mutual respect. Recognize and celebrate that which makes each community unique and special. Contribute to a culture of support, encouragement, and collaboration within the Residence Life Staff Team. Responsibilities include:

- Facilitate and participate in programming initiatives throughout MacEwan Residence Orientation.
- Help residents adjust to living with suitemates and floor mates; facilitate roommate mediations if necessary.
- Meet with each resident one-on-one at least once per semester and submit appropriate documentation by the designated deadlines.
- Develop and facilitate the required number of programs that address the needs of the floor and support the programming model set out by Residence Services.
- Create, maintain, and update a floor communications area and Facebook page for academic information, programming, and happenings on the floor, in residence, or on campus.
- Communicate regularly with the Senior RA and RLC about happenings on assigned floor.

RESPECT – Recognize one's fundamental right to respect. Challenge unhealthy social norms and ensure a learning environment that is safe, inclusive, and respectful is fostered. Responsibilities include:

- Work cooperatively with residents to maintain the rights of all community members.
- Maintain confidentiality about job-related issues.
- Maintain objectivity in all situations.
- Respect the dignity and diversity of each resident and encourage the same from others.
- Create an inclusive atmosphere and promote a sense of belonging to the floor/unit/building/campus community for each resident.

SUMMARY OF EXPECTATIONS

- Demonstrate understanding of MacEwan Residence Handbook and follow-up of policy violations.
- Adhere to all written and verbal protocols established by the RLCs and Residence Services.
- Report on time for each on-duty shift according to the schedule.
- Punctual and regular attendance at all meetings and thoughtful participation with other RLS and RLCs.
- Achievement of all programming expectations as outlined in the programming model.
- Timely and comprehensive coordination and leadership of regular community meetings.
- Set-up and maintain floor communications board and floor Facebook page.
- Consistent and engaged attendance at August, October/November, and January Residence Life Staff Leadership Development Institutes.
- Thorough and timely completion of all administrative duties.
- Timely response to voicemail and email messages within 24 hours.
- Consistent and enthusiastic promotion of Residence Services survey material.

EXHIBIT 3 (CONTINUED)

SCOPE OF POSITION

- There are 17 Residence Assistant positions open to residents who can commit a significant amount of energy to this student leadership position.
- An RA must be a registered full-time student, have 2.0 GPA or higher, and have completed a Standard First Aid Program before assuming their duties.
- Incumbents are required to pay all applicable residence fees.

Mandatory Residence Life Staff Leadership Development Institutes will take place in mid-August as well as additional sessions in October/November and January.

Source: Adapted by the author from MacEwan University internal documents.

EXHIBIT 4: MACEWAN HUMAN RESOURCES VISION

Human Resources understands that MacEwan is a community of Faculty and Staff, working together to foster student success and student contribution. We understand that it is through the individual and collaborative efforts of Faculty and Staff that the Vision and Mission of Grant MacEwan University will be fulfilled and through our individual and collective actions that the Values of MacEwan are exemplified.

Human Resources, working in partnership with stakeholders throughout the University, is integral to the fulfillment of the University's Vision, Mission and Values; supporting the overall student learning experience through the purposeful application of best workplace practices to offer a workplace that is challenging, diverse and fulfilling.

Human Resources Team members are committed to fostering a healthy work culture and environment that: attracts and engages excellent Faculty and Staff, respects and integrates their diverse contributions, nurtures accountability and fairness, develops capacity to pursue excellence, and proactively addresses safety, wellness and other work-related needs; while helping to prepare MacEwan and members of the MacEwan community for the challenges of tomorrow.

Note: The values referred to in this vision statement are the following MacEwan University Pillars: Students First; Personal Learning Experiences; Quality Education; An Engaged University; At the Heart of the City; Sustainability; Student-Engaged Research; and the MacEwan University Spirit.

Source: "Mission and Vision," MacEwan University, accessed June 1, 2016,
www.macewan.ca/wcm/Administrative/HumanResources/MissionandVision/index.htm#2.