

Swerdlow: SAs keep staff aware of issues

This is the second of a two-part series on UNL student assistants.

by Mary Lundak

Student assistants (SA's) have been called the "fingers of the administration's hand in residence halls." The question is, however, are they a cleaned fist of power or an open hand with information?

SA's perform both tasks at UNL, according to UNL Assistant Housing Director, Ken Swerdlow.

"The SA is the closest University staff member to the students who can keep the administration aware of real student issues," he said.

"They are partially trained for counseling and are able to direct the student elsewhere for more information," Swerdlow said. "It is important for the freshman to know someone fairly close who knows the agencies and can feel his needs."

Although an SA performs policing duties, "It is not their prime function and hopefully a minor one," Swerdlow said.

Less than five per cent of students living in residence halls receive formal disciplinary action, he said. The SA acts as an observer and talks with students when a case does come up, the SA is usually a character witness and not the district attorney, Swerdlow added.

Personal judgment is a major factor in the SA's responsibilities. According to the housing official, policies are spelled out, but an SA must determine whether he will ignore an incident or not.

"It is hoped he has the honesty, integrity and

maturity to face the responsibility," Swerdlow added.

"We do have to use a lot of discretion," said one student assistant. "We are the only form of authority for day to day contact with the student but we still have to live on the floor."

Another SA said he didn't like having to enforce rules in which he didn't believe. Swerdlow said that as an employe of the University the SA is obligated to enforce rules, but may work within the normal channels to change them.

Each spring and fall, the SA's attend workshops and are oriented on campus policies. There is plenty of time for a student to back out if he disagrees with policies, Swerdlow said.

Another SA said he believes the feedback to the housing office on policy decisions is not good. "The office is reluctant to meet with the SA. They have a habit of making decisions with no input and they are not receptive to responses afterwards," he said.

Eighty to 85 per cent of the decisions are made by the program staff and residence directors, Swerdlow said. The other 15 to 20 per cent of the decisions are made by the professional staff.

"It is assumed that the residence director is in touch with the SA and student government through weekly staff meetings," he said.

Swerdlow added that no one has complained at mid-year. All mid-year resignations occurred because of graduation, another job or leaving school. The turnover rate is 50 per cent which Swerdlow said is "quite low." He said he does not believe the rate is a bad reflection on housing office policy in dealing with the SA's.

The only complaint that reached the housing office, according to Swerdlow, was that SA's were not receiving parking stickers for lots near their dorm. This problem was corrected, he added.

SA's have no union or formal organization that meets periodically. The weekly staff meetings should enable expression on different viewpoints Swerdlow said.

One SA said he believes it takes an important event such as the visitation conflict last spring to pull the SA's together as a campus group.

"We have our own lives to live and only have time to socialize with the SA's in our dorm. The distance is very real between the dorms and the SA's of each dorm," he said.

Another SA said he opposed the idea that "information received from a student must be communicated to the residence director."

Swerdlow said the rule was made to help students.

He said an SA must hedge on the term "confidential."

There is a difference, he said, between day to day problems and hints of suicide that might be in a student's mind. The SA is responsible for obtaining proper help for the student. The rules also prevent the possibility of law suits against an SA or UNL for concealing information, Swerdlow added.

Another SA complaint was that student teachers would not be allowed to be assistants beginning in 1973. Swerdlow said he believes the policy is not discriminatory.

"The SA position is a job for so much work for so much pay. We can set the criteria for our people," Swerdlow said. "Based on past experience, student teaching requires too much time away from the dorm in teaching and preparation. A student cannot do the job properly with this outside interest."

According to one SA, assistants perform the job to the best of their capabilities. "If we didn't do it, then no one else would," she added.

Perhaps an SA's position at UNL is best described by one SA who said, "You have to be confident, flexible and independent. You have to be everywhere and be able to get along with everyone, but still be able to come back to yourself."



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The Daily Nebraskan is written, edited and managed by students at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. It is editorially independent of the University faculty, administration and student body.

The Daily Nebraskan is published by the Publications Committee on Monday, Wednesday, Thursday and Friday throughout the fall and spring semesters except holidays and vacations.

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