I recently had the opportunity to interview a Resident Assistant (RA) for one of the halls at Penn State Behrend. Tyler Shearer, an RA located at Niagara Hall, provided me with insight on what is expected with being an RA at Penn State Behrend. Being an RA is an important and demanding position that requires a lot of responsibility, communication, and leadership skills. Throughout our interview, Tyler and I explored the responsibilities of an RA while on duty, including their role during rounds, how they deal with incidents, and the challenges and rewards of the position.

Resident Assistants are the frontline staff members of residence halls responsible for ensuring a safe, secure, and respectful environment for residents. According to Tyler, an RA's general responsibilities include answering residents' questions, enforcing policies, completing rounds, and responding to incidents. Duty hours at Niagara Hall typically begin at 8pm and end at 12am, which becomes 1am on weekends.

During their shift, Resident Assistants are expected to perform rounds every hour to check for safety or policy violations and ensure that residents feel safe and comfortable. RAs are also available to answer residents' questions and provide resources to those who might be struggling with anything. In addition to rounds, RAs are responsible for changing the "Who's on Duty?" signs every day, which indicate who is on duty that night. These signs are essential for residents to know who to contact in case of any emergency.

The Coordinator on Duty, sometimes referred to as C.o.D, is a higher-level staff member available to assist RAs with any incidents or emergencies during their shift. If a situation arises that the RA is unsure how to handle, they can contact the Coordinator on Duty for guidance. RAs can reach the Coordinator on Duty through a phone provided by the university. It is essential to note that RAs must report any incidents or policy violations to their own Coordinator as soon as possible, if not, the next day. This is to ensure accountability and documentation.

When an incident occurs, the RA must complete an incident report form that documents the details of the incident, such as the time, location, and involved parties. The form also requires a description of the incident and how it was resolved. Most issues must be reported immediately, and the form must be turned in by 24 hours. Tyler emphasized the importance of being detailed and accurate when filling out the incident report form. Incident reports help keep track of issues and enable the housing department to address them quickly and effectively.

RAs are also responsible for reporting any issue related to housing or maintenance, such as a broken window or a clogged sink, to the appropriate authority. Depending on the severity of the issue, the RA might need to notify the Coordinator on Duty or the university's maintenance department. Reporting these issues promptly helps ensure that residents have a safe and comfortable living environment.

Duty scheduling is done on a selection basis, and RAs typically schedule themselves on a main weekday for their schedule. Whoever is on duty during weekends generally rotates between each RA at the hall. It is essential to note that RAs are not allowed to conduct a community builder or program on the same night they are on duty. Additionally, RAs are not allowed to leave the hall unless it is an emergency.

Engaging with residents is a crucial part of an RA's responsibilities. During their rounds, RAs often engage with residents who are not in crisis and talk about their day or their plans for the weekend. These conversations can be an opportunity to build a sense of community and help residents feel more comfortable in their hall. Tyler also mentioned that as an RA, although simple, it is important to be nice and give smiles to those you see throughout the building and in your community. RAs can also host events and programs that promote community building and provide opportunities for residents to connect with one another.

Balancing the RA role with academics and other out of classroom experiences can be a challenge, and it requires quick learning of time management and organization skills. Tyler explained that RAs are students first, and that academics should always be the top priority. To manage their workload, RAs often schedule their study time around their duty shifts and other responsibilities. He also mentioned that as you progress as an RA, the workload becomes “easier to adapt.” They also need to communicate with their residents and other staff members to make sure they are available to help with any issues that may arise.

Fire safety is a critical aspect of the RA's job, and every RA should be well-versed in the fire drill procedures for their hall. Tyler explained that when fire drills are conducted that RAs help ensure that all residents have evacuated the building and are outside of the hall safely. During a fire drill, RAs should follow the established protocol and assist residents in exiting the building quickly and safely. If the alarm goes off and it is not part of a drill, the RA should assume that it is a real emergency and follow the same protocol. They should quickly assess the situation, alert residents, and call the Coordinator on Duty or Police Services if necessary.

Fall arrival, welcome week, and spring arrival are busy times for RAs, and they involve additional responsibilities beyond their regular duties. During these times, RAs are involved in the move-in process, which includes welcoming new residents, helping them get settled in their rooms, and answering any questions they may have. RAs also help organize and lead orientation sessions and other events to help new residents get to know each other and feel more comfortable in their new home. Tyler explained that these times can be stressful, but they are also great opportunities to build a sense of community and make a positive impact on residents.

Tyler mentioned that one of the biggest challenges is being prepared for random situations that you may never have thought to happen. RAs need to be firm but fair in their interactions with residents, and this can sometimes be difficult. Additionally, RAs often need to handle difficult situations, such as conflicts between residents or incidents that could potentially involve alcohol or drugs. These situations can be stressful and require effective communication and problem-solving skills.

The most enjoyable part of the RA position, according to Tyler, is the opportunity to make a positive impact on residents by helping newcomers transition into college and pass down knowledge that he has learned during his time here at Penn State Behrend. RAs have the chance to get to know residents on a personal level, help them with any issues they may have, and create a supportive and inclusive environment. Tyler mentioned that seeing residents grow and succeed is a rewarding experience. Additionally, the RA position provides opportunities for personal and professional growth, such as developing leadership skills and gaining experience in conflict resolution as well as communication.

Being an RA is a significant responsibility that requires dedication, hard work, and excellent communication skills. Throughout my interview with Tyler, I gained a better understanding of the RA role and the various responsibilities it entails. Overall, the RA position is an essential and valuable opportunity for students to develop leadership skills, build connections within their community, and gain valuable experience in a professional setting. It is a unique and rewarding experience that not only benefits the residents but also the RAs themselves, as they grow and learn from their experiences in the role.