

The Role of the Resident Assistants: Lessons Learned from Two Kukui Cups

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Abstract

The Kukui Cup is an advanced energy challenge whose goal is to investigate the relationships among energy literacy, sustained energy conservation, and information technology support of behavior change. Kukui Cup challenges have been held in the University of Hawaii Hale Aloha residence halls in both 2011 and 2012. Resident participation in the Kukui Cup is crucial to its success, and there is much evidence to suggest that the Resident Advisors can play an important role in obtaining resident engagement. This report presents data collected from the Resident Assistants from both years and analyzes it with the goal of understanding how to best utilize resident advisors.

1. Introduction

Resident advisors (RAs) have many responsibilities, including administration, community building, helping residents, creating a safe and healthy environment, promoting diversity, assisting the transition to campus living, and supporting academic and personal growth. Over the past two years, Resident Advisors at the University of Hawaii Hale Aloha residence halls have supported the Kukui Cup Challenge. In this report, I summarize our experiences so far with the two very different approaches we took with Resident Advisors in 2011 and 2012, and what that might imply for RA involvement in 2013.

2. The 2011 Kukui Cup

2.1. 2011 Preparations

The inaugural Kukui Cup was three weeks long, starting in mid-October of 2011 and lasting until the first week of November. In preparation for the initial Kukui Cup, the following actions with respect to RAs were taken:

- A powerpoint presentation on the goals of the Kukui Cup were presented to the RAs a week or so before the start of the competition;
- The RAs were informed that they were not eligible to participate in the prizes, but that “special” games would be provided for them.
- The RAs were told that their participation was voluntary.
- A “Game Plan” document was provided with a complete list of all Kukui Cup activities.

2.2. 2011 Resident participation

From an individual perspective, the 2011 Kukui Cup engaged about 418 students, although almost 80 of them were signed up in the last days of the competition by the leading contenders for the grand prize (signing up new players

<p><i>Question (1a): If you participated (i.e. logged in and accumulated at least 50 points), then please answer the following: What were the top things that motivated you to participate?</i></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Energy consciousness. I “heart” Kukui Cup! 2. I participated because I felt it was for a good cause. 3. Top things that motivated me was the participation and getting a gift card. When you add money to the equation you add motivation. 4. Lounge-level prizes 5. Prizes and field trips. 6. Participation reward. 7. Money and great prizes. 8. Prizes and statistical information was motivating. 9. Another thing in common with my residents, being able to do activities with them. 10. Importance of energy conservation. 11. Get points 12. Show lounge/floor pride. 13. Prizes 14. A handful of my residents were interested and participating early on. 15. Competition.. I wanted to be in the top... I can’t help it! Ha Ha! 16. Getting people excited to participate. 17. Prizes 18. Being able to explain the competition to my residents and/or just to be able to know what was happening. 19. My kids wanting to win. :) 	<p><i>Question (1b): If you did not participate (i.e. never logged in or just once or twice), then please answer the following: Why did you not participate, and what would be the most important change we could make next year to motivate RAs such as yourself to participate?</i></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Was just too busy. Give the RAs incentives before the competition starts. 2. Prizes that we were not qualified for. 3. I participated some, but never logged points. I was just really busy at the time. I really liked the Cup, though. 4. I didn’t log in but I took steps to lower my energy consumption. I think we all believed in the mission, perhaps we could all register together in a staff meeting or something.²⁴ I was just so busy! And I’m not very motivated by prizes. 5. I went to events but did not redeem points. I am not into earning things. 6. I kept forgetting to log on but I participated by saving energy. 7. I was super motivated to participate but I was waaaaay caught up in school and work and homework and just had a lot going on. It had nothing to do with how the Kukui Cup was run, Kukui Cup was awesome! 8. It was difficult to understand how to achieve points. 9. I’m not sure. 10. Pure laziness on my part. It was a great idea and I was really interested in the event, I just got caught up in school work and other responsibilities. 11. I think the news that RAs could participate for prizes fell through the cracks. 12. Too many midterms. 13. Did not participate because school is more important. 14. More prizes, not just gift cards.
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Figure 1. 2011 Questionnaire: Issues surrounding RA participation

earns a player a “referral bonus”). So, approximately a third of the Hale Aloha residents were engaged by the 2011 Kukui Cup.

From a lounge perspective, there was only one lounge that obtained over 50% participation, and this lounge won both the prize for reducing energy the most and the prize for collectively earning the most points. This lounge had two RAs who were extremely active in promoting the Kukui Cup.

2.3. 2011 Questionnaire results

After the competition ended, we met with the RAs to obtain their insight into how we could improve involvement in the Kukui Cup. The questionnaire and responses are provided in Figures 1 and 2.

2.4. 2011 Questionnaire analysis

Analysis of the comments revealed several common trends. First, there appeared to be three major motivators for residents who participated:

1. Prizes (mentioned 8 times).
2. Resident relationships (mentioned 6 times)
3. The “cause” of energy conservation (mentioned 3 times)

<p><i>Question (2): This year, 400 students participated, but that means 600 students did not. What do you think are the most important, realistic changes we could make to double participation for next year?</i></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. More advertisements (<i>repeated 9 times</i>) 2. Turn off all lights in building for 30 secs at night to get everyone's attention 3. Better timing for events 4. More incentives for RAs to get participation up. Separate prize. 5. Well, RAs play a big role but the RAs also don't have motivation to join because there isn't equal opportunity. 6. It's not part of the job so it's extra work that adds to our already busy schedule. 7. More RA incentive to get involved so residents get involved. Maybe give the RAs some resources or have a Kukui Cup hang-out place. 8. Participation prizes. 9. ADVERTISE. Make the event so obviously in everyone's face that they can't ignore it. Flyers should be provided to the RAs to post on their floor. 10. Get the RAs motivated to encourage their residents to participate. 11. More RA incentives. 12. Timing of events at late hours on the weekdays. 13. I would not know but I know most of my residents weren't home most days especially weekends. So they did not participate. 14. Have more open, public, big events. 15. Too many things going on in the Kukui Cup. Too confusing to the residents. 16. Get more students informed, perhaps start the competition earlier. 17. Advertise it more before the challenge starts so that residents know what the challenge is about and can participate. 18. Proper presentation to all the students on how to achieve points. 19. Find a way to get the word out faster. Maybe ask RAs to go door-to-door, that's what I did. Start the participation and incentive program for RAs in the first round. 20. Saying RAs can get programming credits will get them going, and reminders about it. 21. Stating RAs can win the normal prizes will help. 22. Have a signup day in the courtyard with computers. 23. Get an email when you are outbid on an item. 24. More availability for excursions. 25. More flyers, like weekly calendars for floors. 26. Cooler prizes, more advertising, better techniques. Better incentives for the residents, school is important, make them see why energy saving is cool. 27. Maybe motivate by providing programming credits as well. 28. Get supervisors to exempt us from programming for the month to get more RA participation. 29. Why not give the RAs equal opportunity? I know it's so it would be like it's not rigged buy we have nothing do with it and we have to try just as hard to get points. 30. Do it in the same way, but focus on a serious ad campaign leading up to and during the event. 	<p><i>Is there anything else you feel we should know that can help us next year?</i></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Stay awesome 2. Students don't like to go out of their way. But you did everything out of the books for success. So I don't know why it wasn't more successful. 3. Make the competition longer. 4. It needs to be broadcasted more and be more competitive to get involvement. 5. Cash prizes = more participation. 6. Consider targeting other residence halls. 7. Free stuff gets people to participate. 8. Continue to do it! 9. Emphasize the beneficial points to the surroundings, the prizes, saving the environment, etc. 10. Some residents don't really care for energy competition so it takes more to get them involved. I think more athletic activities would help. 11. Should apply to more than just the freshman towers. I know a lot of people in Frear and in the apartments 12. wanted to be able to participate. 13. Keep doing this. My residents loved it and I think it's a great asset to residential life and the broader community. 14. The RAs don't have to put in much effort, so there is no excuse. The work to help promote should be up to us! 15. Thank you so much for this experience! 16. Variety of prizes was good. Prizes that people want to win will keep people motivated. 17. Programs were fun, keep up the good work. 18. Somehow integrate RA-resident activities to encourage more participation. 19. Do it in Frear. Less resident apathy. 20. I'm not sure, you guys did so good this year. Maybe do it in Frear?
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Figure 2. 2011 Questionnaire: Suggestions for change

Second, there appeared to be three primary obstacles identified by RAs who did not participate:

1. Too busy/too much schoolwork. (mentioned 6 times)
2. Problems with prizes (mentioned 5 times)
3. Participated, but did not log in (mentioned 4 times)

Finally, the following were the most popular free-response comments:

1. Improve advertising (mentioned 14 times)
2. Provide programming credits/resources for RAs (mentioned 8 times)
3. Do not exclude RAs from regular prizes (mentioned 4 times)

3. The 2012 Kukui Cup

3.1. 2011 Preparations

During the planning of 2012, we made several significant changes to the Kukui Cup with respect to the role of the RAs:

- We made RAs “regular players” and thus eligible for all prizes.
- We created a second RA incentive game, in which they could obtain a bookstore gift card if a target attendance level was reached for their events.
- Kukui Cup involvement was formally made a part of the RA’s job responsibilities.
- We ramped up advertising, including: (a) promotional videos about the Kukui Cup and micro-documentaries of the events; (b) an actively updated Facebook page, and (c) signs posted outside all four Tower elevators with upcoming Kukui Cup events. We posted 10 of these “Elevator Updates” during the 27 days of the competition. Beyond our own efforts to improve advertising, we also tasked the RAs with getting the word out in their own way.

Shortly before the start of the 2012 Kukui Cup, we had a meeting with the RAs in which we presented the following:

- The goals and motivation for the Kukui Cup through a powerpoint presentation.
- The two RA incentive games they could play. One would earn them bookstore certificates for achieving a 50%, 75%, or 100% participation from their lounge. The other would earn them bookstore certificates for achieving a target level of attendance at events.
- That Kukui Cup participation was mandatory, not optional. This included planning and execution of two Kukui Cup events, which would count toward their program responsibilities for September.
- We distributed the “Game Plan” document providing times, dates, and descriptions for all events during the 2012 Kukui Cup.

In mid-August, we also distributed a spreadsheet in which RAs could sign up for events. We initially proposed only 2-3 RAs per event, but the Resident Directors requested an increase to 4 RAs per event.

On September 1, two days before the competition began, I created and distributed to the RAs a five minute YouTube video that provided a tutorial to using the Kukui Cup website specifically geared to their needs.

During the competition, we scheduled a 30 minute meeting with the RAs associated with each event during the week prior to the event’s occurrence. During this meeting, we went over the event with the RAs so they could market it effectively to their students.

3.2. 2012 In-game RA Feedback

As noted above, RA participation in the Kukui Cup was defined as a mandatory part of their job responsibilities in 2012. After the first week of the challenge, we checked RA participation and discovered that:

- Out of the 40+ RAs, less than a dozen of them had watched the RA-specific, five minute YouTube video on the Kukui Cup game.

- 23 out of the 40+ RAs had either never logged in to the game, or had logged in only once.

In hopes of catalyzing involvement by the RAs, we sent them an email the following week. Although the email contained the actual RA names, they are excised in the following version:

Greetings, all,

As a followup to my prior email on Lounge participation, here are some figures on RA participation:

300+ points: (8 RAs, names deleted)

100-299 points: (11 RAs, names deleted)

25-70 points (i.e. approximately 1 login): (11 RAs, names deleted)

0 points (never logged in): (12 RAs, names deleted)

I believe strongly that you cannot be an effective advocate for the Kukui Cup if you do not participate in the game. Students on your floor are able to tell if you are participating or not, and it can be disincentivizing to see that the RA doesn't care enough to play, even worse if they are telling students to play but not doing it themselves!

As a reminder, I've created a 6 minute video that you can watch to learn more about how to use the system and support participation: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GQsy0XB0ySw>

I would like to request that you spend a few minutes at your meeting tonight discussing Week 1. Here are some possible discussion questions:

(1) From those who are playing, what motivated you to play?

(2) From those who aren't playing, why haven't you started?

(3) What changes can we make to help promote additional participation (by both residents and RAs in the next week)?

It would be great if someone could send me a brief email with the results of this discussion that I can use to help improve the challenge.

Thanks very much to everyone who is participating and supporting the Kukui Cup so far.

Note that it is still entirely possible for the last place lounge to catch up to the first place lounge this week. Starting next week, there will be new levels unlocked, and it will be harder. This is your chance!

Our request for a discussion on items (1) - (3) was not implemented. We did receive feedback about this email from a Resident Director, which stated in part:

I've received some feedback this morning from RAs that they are uncomfortable with how they have received the feedback about their participation. For student staff it is important that certain feedback is given in a one-on-one conversation or private email with a supervisor instead of being shared through emails to all 40+ staff participating. [...] I don't want the format of feedback to discourage or embarrass RAs as that could result in staff losing motivation to participate or having negative feelings about the Kukui Cup (which none of us want).

In retrospect, this reveals one of several misassumptions we had about the role of RAs in the Kukui Cup. We assumed that, unlike in 2011, there would be little need to "motivate" RAs because it was now part of their job description. After having given them a presentation on the challenge, a video to watch, and a week to get engaged, we assumed that it was perfectly reasonable to provide game-like feedback in the form of a scoreboard (given that, as noted in the email, the participation or non-participation of the RAs was public knowledge to their residents within the game). What the reply from the Resident Director made us aware of is that, operationally speaking, there is much less difference than we had assumed between "mandatory" and "voluntary" RA involvement in the Kukui Cup. We will return to this issue in Section 4.

As a result of the Resident Director feedback, we sent the following email to the RAs:

Greetings, Hale Aloha RAs,

Holly and Isaac informed me that some of you were taken aback by my recent email, as you have been diligently promoting the Kukui Cup to your students even though you have not been playing the game yourself. I certainly do not want to demoralize or disincentivize any of you, and we in the Kukui Cup project

sincerely appreciate all your efforts. I apologize for not having communicated clearly enough why your efforts to promote the Kukui Cup need to be combined with at least nominal game play on your part. Here is some explanation:

(1) Providing specifics of the game to students.

It is one thing to say, "The Kukui Cup is cool, you should do it." It is more effective to say, "Oh, you're an English major? Did you know you can write a poem and get points in the Kukui Cup?" Or, "Hey, you're in Engineering? You can check out an energy meter from the CDCs and measure your refrigerator power and energy for the Kukui Cup." In other words, by playing the game, you will learn about the actual content, and can provide specific details of the game to attract your students, which should increase the success of your efforts.

(2) "Do as I say, not as I do" is rarely effective.

Actions speak louder than words. By playing the game yourself, you are showing your students that you are willing to do what you are asking them to do, which can only help recruitment.

(3) Lack of participation has a negative impact on those in your lounge who do participate.

Several features of the game (Participation Levels, Daily Energy Goal Game, Lounge-level Top Score Game) are designed to directly reward individuals based upon the group's involvement. By not playing the game, you make it harder for those in your lounge to compete with respect to these features.

(4) It does not take a lot of time to play the game.

We designed the Kukui Cup activities so that the vast majority take under 10 minutes to complete. You can play once a day for 10 minutes, say an hour a week, and be a significant positive force for your lounge. We're not asking you to make the Kukui Cup a part-time job.

(5) You might actually find it interesting.

We get a lot of comments from players that they find the three minute videos and the topic of energy in Hawaii to be much more interesting than they expected.

The following table contrasts RA participation in the online game after the first week of the competition with participation in mid-October. The most important change is that the number of non-participating RAs (i.e. those who either never logged in or logged in only once) has dropped from 23 to 15. This still seems like an unacceptably high number for a "mandatory" component of the RA job description. It is not known what, if any, impact the preceeding emails had on the following data:

Points	Number of RAs (as of Sept 10)	Number of RAs (as of Oct 18)
300+	8	17
71-299	11	11
25-70 (1 login)	11	7
0 (never logged in)	12	8

3.3. 2012 Resident participation

Preliminary analysis of the data from September, 2012 indicates that the 2012 Kukui Cup achieved almost exactly the same results as 2011. Approximately 320 students participated in the game, which is almost identical to the number of players from 2011 (not taking into account the last day signups). Once again, only one lounge achieved over 50% participation, and just like last year, that one lounge won both the prize for reducing energy the most and the prize for collectively earning the most points. Like last year, this lounge had two RAs who were extremely active in promoting the Kukui Cup.

We find it quite interesting that despite significant changes to RA participation and significantly more advertising, we were unable to significantly increase student participation.

There is one indicator we are already aware of that has changed significantly and positively in 2012. During 2011, approximately 3,000 activity submissions were made to the administrators. In 2012, that number doubled, to over 6,000 submissions. What this means is that while the total number of students playing the game did not change, those who played the game were substantially more active in the game than last year.

3.4. 2012 Questionnaire results

After the 2012 competition ended, we met with the RAs to obtain their insight into how we could improve involvement in the Kukui Cup. The process this year was more simple than last year: we handed out index cards and asked them to write down one thing they thought went well this year and one thing they thought should be improved. Figure 3 shows the results.

3.5. 2012 Questionnaire analysis

Analysis of the positive comments revealed the following common responses:

1. Prizes/Incentives (mentioned on 18 out of 32 cards).
2. Workshops/events (mentioned on 14 out of 32 cards)
3. Other: structure of website, guest speakers, excursions, food, Facebook

The suggestions for improvement seemed to cluster as follows:

1. Promotion/flyers/advertising (mentioned on 16 out of 31 cards)
2. Complexity/user friendliness of website (mentioned on 4 cards)
3. Offer prizes past first place (mentioned 2 times, but appeared to be copied).
4. Make it more "fun"/less boring (mentioned 5 times)
5. Provide "professional" staff (mentioned 2 times)
6. Clearer RA responsibilities, better direction (mentioned 3 times)

4. Recommendations for the 2013 Kukui Cup

After two years of experiences with two different groups of RAs, here are our tentative conclusions:

(1) One third of Hale Aloha residents may be the "natural" adoption level for the Kukui Cup. It is striking to us that despite significantly more and better marketing in 2012 than in 2011, and despite the change from voluntary to mandatory involvement of RAs, the basic level of adoption remained unchanged.

It does seem that our changes did appear to have an impact on the engagement of those 333 people, but not on the 666 others who once again declined to participate.

Note that we are not claiming 1/3 as a universal constant. The HPU Kukui Cup achieved over 50% adoption with one residence hall achieving 100% participation.

(2) Hale Aloha RAs are students too. There are several implications of this statement. First, the "natural" involvement of Hale Aloha RAs might be just like the population as a whole, with about 1/3 of the RAs actively engaging with the challenge, and 2/3 participating minimally or not at all regardless of whether participation is voluntary or mandatory.

Second, Hale Aloha RAs as a whole do not have any special skills with respect to engagement of their residents. In both years, there was only one lounge in which the RAs achieved both significant engagement and energy reduction, and this was independent of the presence of advertising, mandatory engagement by the RAs, etc.

Third, it is clear that from the feedback that the 2012 RAs did not feel ownership over the Kukui Cup. For example, the most common suggestion for improvement was "more advertising", but not a single RA appeared to recognize that advertising was one of their primary responsibilities! They also wanted clearer definition of their responsibilities, but we strongly believe that these definitions were provided to them at multiple times.

(3) Spring semester might be a better time for the Kukui Cup. One interesting suggestion made by an RA this year is to hold the Kukui Cup in the Spring semester, not the Fall semester. The rationale for this is that during Fall semester, there are many more events competing for student's time and attention. During Spring, there is less happening, and so the Kukui Cup will stand out more.

(4) Hale Aloha staff should take over planning and execution of the Kukui Cup. The Kukui Cup has been planned and executed by members of the Collaborative Software Development Laboratory (CSDL) for the past two years as part

<p><i>What was one good thing about the Kukui Cup?</i></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. The structure and organization of the website and events. 2. I like the pace of the events. 3. The incentives that are given out at the events. 4. Workshops and prizes are keeping the residents engaged. 5. Prizes, swag, energy meter 6. It's good. I believe that the residents that want to participate will. 7. Swag. 8. The prizes are a good motivator. 9. The workshops are fun, good music and turnout. Prizes and incentives. 10. Lounge parties, slam poetry event. 11. Great incentives, great programs. 12. One thing that works well is the incentives, such as the t-shirts and cups. 13. Chillaxation and Scavenger Hunt. (on two cards) 14. Many events for people to go to, different times and days. 15. Chillaxation and slam poetry. 16. Bringing in guests to speak and give different points of view; going to different sites like farms and local places that support green living. 17. Giving away free items builds a crowd for the events. 18. Types of events hosted are fun and interesting for students. 19. Great prizes; nice effort in getting people involved. 20. Prizes and incentives. 21. Lounge party prizes; poetry event. 22. Great incentives to initiate participation. (on two cards) 23. Prizes; food; facebook updates. 24. The prizes are cool 25. Prizes and activities 26. All of the Kukui events compacted into two months; online stuff is good because of easy access. 27. The events not in the dorms, like the wind farm and the garden on Saturdays. 28. Free prizes for residents 29. Good advertising and pushing for participation; good mission – means well – prizes and incentives. 	<p><i>What do you think should be improved?</i></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Better advertising. <i>mentioned six times.</i> 2. It was nice to be involved in the KC, but RAs felt really pressured to put KC goals above RA duties and expectations, which made us confused and conflicted. Please don't pressure us so much. 3. People seemed to be dissuaded because it's too competitive. 4. More motivation for the residents who don't already participate. 5. Hype goes up and down; should be shorter. 6. Promotion: more effective, make it desirable. 7. More ongoing events. 8. Help with event promotion or at least fliers made with the dates of all events. 9. The website is too complicated; my residents get confused just logging on and they feel that it's not "fun" enough to spend time on even though I keep telling them how easy it is. Also, maybe more prizes, like top prizes [beyond] the first place in each lounge. 10. Need more professional staff other than using us RAs who don't know squat about the Kukui Cup. 11. No initial advertisements to explain the Kukui Cup. More direction from the Kukui Cup staff to the RAs regarding what to do during events. Also involvement from the Kukui Cup staff at events. 12. More incentives; more user friendly website; more appealing for freshman; not so time consuming; make it fun. 13. Incentives; website was confusing even for RA; better programs—less boring; staff needs to be more professional and informed. 14. Give us flyers to put under the doors of resident's rooms; next year clearly explain what the Kukui Cup is beforehand (goals, sustainability, competition). 15. Have more information about the Kukui Cup and what it is at events; more ways on how to save energy; more ways explaining why energy conservation is important; 16. RAs shouldn't be required to go to events. Both events I attended were completely overstaffed and most of the RAs had nothing to do. Advertisements are also poor: no explanation of what the Kukui Cup actually is. 17. Be more clear about the RA duties. Don't require the RAs to be there unless necessary; we have busy schedules and seem to do nothing at events. 18. More engaging videos; prizes that related to us more; more advertising; less of a time commitment for RAs. 19. Clearer and more advertising; more user-friendly website; more info to RAs about events (especially the ones we signed up for). 20. Need to offer prizes past first places to encourage participation. 21. Expand prizes range; only the top win; and maybe increase advertisements for clarity. 22. Limited space on events; marketing; variety of events. 23. You have to go to almost every event to get the good stuff and most people don't have time. 24. Online games are a tad bit boring. Make it more interactive/related to the residents. 25. Online games take too long and are boring. 26. Tying the electronic game into homework and energy study tips; energy meter app. 27. Motivate residents; my residents don't want to participate because they see no value. 28. Length of videos.
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Figure 3. 2012 Questionnaire: Good and bad things about the 2012 Kukui Cup

of a project sponsored by the National Science Foundation. That funding comes to an end in summer 2013, which will make it difficult for CSDL to provide the same level of support for the Kukui Cup as it has in the previous two years. Fortunately, the project has matured to the point where other organizations (HPU, EWC) have put on Kukui Cup challenges with only minimal support from CSDL.

We also suspect that one of the reasons for low RA engagement is the sense that the Kukui Cup is this externally organized project that is being imposed upon them, not a project that they have control over. By moving to the challenge to Spring 2013, the Hale Aloha staff would have an entire semester to organize the challenge, which would appear to be sufficient time.

Finally, we believe that the staff of Hale Aloha now has enough experience with the Challenge to make whatever changes it sees fit and create something that more closely fits their needs.