In February of 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic had entered full force into the United States, affecting hundreds of thousands of people nationwide. Moving a bit closer to home, when the pandemic hit New York in March of 2020, most institutions of higher education moved to virtual remote learning for the remainder of the spring 2020 semester. Residents living on campus were given the choice to move back home, or remain on campus for the remainder of the semester.

We can certainly say that the COVID-19 pandemic has shifted the way that we have lived our lives. For most, there has never been an experience in our lifetime that involved a global pandemic. In this qualitative study, we looked at Graduate students serving as Graduate Assistants in Residence Life across various campuses within Western, NY. These GA’s, students themselves, were forced to become essential workers when the pandemic hit, while transitioning themselves to full time remote studies. The pandemic has certainly brought to light many challenges & barriers that students face alike. Studies have shown these barriers can include technology, shelter, financial stability, among many others. Graduate Assistants in Residence Life have faced their own challenges and hardships, while working to support and provide for the students on campus during this pandemic.

So, how are Residential Graduate Assistants finding meaning through their work and educational experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic? Studies have shown that unanticipated events, like a global pandemic, lead to lack of structure, as individuals need time to cope and transition, while making sense of the new reality. Among many GA’s in residence life, structure, or lack thereof, has greatly affected how these students go about their day to day. The typical “9-5”work hours do not exist. Structure within themselves provides great struggle as these GA’s face the reality of “living where you work and working where you live”. This lack of structure within their work balance greatly interrupts their academic environment, often times overlapping with their academic classes, including delivering meals, responding to potential exposures of COVID-19, etc. The need for support from their staff is critical to maintaining any balance, especially during this time.

Amidst great adversity and barriers that GA’s have faced, there is a reinforced positive outlook on the horizon of this pandemic, specifically through creativity and innovation. GA’s have seen the bright-side of the darkest days of the pandemic, and have focused on what is to come from them experiences they have had, rather than what they have lost. Why is this important? The way in which we look at the work of GA’s and how they interpret their experiences, it is important to realize that they are students first, experiencing the pandemic from many angles. This pandemic has affected the way in which everyone goes about their daily lives, but for GA’s in Residence Life positions, the work they continue to do to serve students through this pandemic perseveres through their own academic barriers and challenges, and making sense of their own reality.