

The Musings of a Conduct Officer



[Student Conduct: More Than Meets the Eye](#) [The Code of Conduct](#)

The Conduct Conversation

By smo17 On January 15, 2015 · [Add Comment](#)

Let's face it, no one likes to be talked to for doing something wrong. Students that come in to meet with a conduct officer, most likely, are there because they violated a policy. So immediately going into the conversation there is already this tension, at least from the student to the conduct officer. So the goal of the conduct officer in the conduct conversation is very multifaceted:

1) Build rapport with the student. – It is important to build a connection with a student so that they feel comfortable talking to you about the situation, talking about what is going on in their life and sharing with you any mitigating factors that caused them to violate the policy. This is extremely hard to do, especially when you only have 10 to 15 minutes to do it. However this is probably one of the most important aspects of the conduct conversation because it is important that the student recognize that conduct officers are more than just employees at the University that enforce policy, but that we are truly advocates for the student and just genuinely care about the student's overall success. This part of the conversation allows the conduct officer to ask questions to get to know the student such as some of the questions below: Where are you from?

- What brought you to Penn State?
- What is your Major?
- What do you want to do with that major?

Recent Posts

[Decision Making: From a Dream to Reality](#)
[The Little Book of Restorative Justice](#)
[Protected: Student Advocacy & the Message](#)
[Better Alcohol EDU Needed BASICS](#)
[Part 2: Advances because of Title IX](#)
[Part 1: What is Title IX?](#)
[Values and Ethics](#)
[The Code of Conduct](#)
[The Conduct Conversation](#)
[Student Conduct: More Than Meets the Eye](#)
[Student Conduct: An Introduction](#)

How are you doing academically?

Have you gotten involved on campus? Joined any clubs or organizations?

What has your Penn State experience been like thus far?

What is the coolest thing you have done since you have been on campus?

What was the transition like for you coming from high school to Penn State?

What does it mean to you to be a part of the Penn State Community?

The point though is to actively listen to the student and get to hear who the student really is? I think a struggle with conduct officers and really anyone in a position who has to work with talking to someone about repetitive behavior is not being sincere and lumping the students together. There are only so many times you can meet with students about alcohol where the situations all start to blend together. With that, it is important to make sure that you are being very engaged in the conversation and making sure that you know which student is which. If you aren't sincere, the student is going to pick up on it very easily.

As I always tell my RAs, you have to separate the student from their actions. Just because the student made a decision where their values did not support the ethical standards of Penn State does not mean that the student is not a good person, it just means that they made a decision that had consequences. It is important to recognize the individualism of each student regardless of the fact the behavior is similar to other students you have met with.

2) Letting the Student Share their Story. – This is the second part of the conversation and is equally important. Every story is different and there are always multiple sides to a story so it is really important for a student to be able to tell you what happened during the situation that brought them to meet with you. Giving the student the opportunity to reflect upon the situation and talk about it is part of the process of moving forward past the situation. During this time, it is important to actively listen to the student and then engage in open-ended questions that require the student to elaborate on the situation while also being able to gather the information to allow you to piece together the story

as accurately as possible.

3) Reflection and non-judgmental approach. – This is an important thing to remember with the conduct process. The student is usually 18 or older and an adult and they can choose to make whatever decisions they choose to make. As a conduct officer it is important to remind students that “you” are not nor is “Penn State” judging the student, but advocating for the student to ensure that the student can be successful at Penn State. The conversation is not about how you feel about the situation, but giving the student the opportunity to reflect on the situation and to look at some of the outcomes/consequences from the situation and what the take-aways are from the situation.

I think a lot of times in a situation, a student does not always think about the long-term consequences and thinks more about the short-term consequences, so giving the student the chance to think about how the situation can affect them both short-term and long-term is important in discussing the situation.

4) Talking about the alleged violation. So if a student is meeting with a conduct officer in a conduct conversation, it is usually because the Office of Student Conduct has received a report either from police or from residence life alleging that a violation occurred.

In this process it is important to explain to the student what the student code of conduct is. A lot of students do not necessarily know or understand the code of conduct so having the conversation with them about the code of conduct is important.

Sharing with the student the report is important so that the student knows exactly what is being alleged against them and then explaining what areas in the code of conduct the alleged violation could fall. In this process, I like to have the student look at the Code of Conduct and read through it to see, based upon the situation that brought them to OSC, could there be a violation of the code? Once the student has settled on what that possible violation could be, I like to talk to the student to get their thoughts on why they chose whatever violation they chose for the situation.

5) Recommended Sanctions. – This is the process where a student conduct officer can advocate for a student. Our goal in the process is not to find the student responsible for the situation, but to walk them through the conduct process in the hopes that at the end of the conversation the student recognizes that it is “their” actions that ultimately got them in trouble. This is the same concept we tell RA’s all the time that the RA is not getting the student in trouble and that the RA’s role is to just document the factual information of a situation that they have witnessed.

So as an advocate for the student, the job of the conduct officer is to recommend sanctions based upon the alleged violation. It is through these sanctions that we want the student to have the opportunity to reflect in greater detail about the situation that brought the student to the conduct conversation. We want the process to be educational and we want the student to gain something from the sanctions that are recommended. The goal of the process is to be educational and not punitive and we do not want to just assign sanctions for sanctions sake, but really to assign something that will cause the student to pause and reflect upon the situation so that hopefully in the future they choose not to make the same decision or end up violating the same policy.

With the sanctions, there are some sanctions that are standard across the board, however the process is set up to allow for flexibility based upon the situation and the conversation that is had with the student in the conduct conversation.

There are primary sanctions and active sanctions. Primary sanctions are more standard and serve to place the student on a specific level based upon the violation. In general, the conduct process at Penn State builds upon itself. When a student violates the code of conduct, we take into consideration each individual sanction as well as the overall conduct record of the student. Primary sanctions build upon each other and gauge where the student falls in the process. Primary sanctions are conduct conversation, conduct warning, conduct probation, extended conduct probation, conduct probation with transcript notation, suspension, expulsion. So if a student is placed on a warning and then comes in for another violation, the next primary sanction will be the next one up the rung of the ladder.

Active sanctions include workshops, educational programs, community service, reflection papers, consultations, and restitution. These active sanctions are really the educational piece of the conduct process and really encourages the student to think about the situation and the impact the situation could have both short-term and long-term for the student, anyone else involved in the situation and/or the community affected.

6) Giving the student a Choice. The last part of the conduct process is having the student sign the conference summary. The conference summary form gives students 4 options.

The first option is that the student can take responsibility for their actions and accept the sanctions and charges. If they take responsibility, the alleged violation because the official violation and the sanctions go into place immediately.

The second option is the student can choose to contest. If they contest the student is saying they do not take responsibility for their actions, they don't agree with the alleged violation or the recommended sanctions or they have more information to share that they do not feel comfortable sharing with the conduct officer. If they contest, the situation will go to an administrative hearing to decide the next steps.

Lastly the student can take 3 business days to make a decision. A fourth option is allowed for situations that are sanctioned conduct probation with transcript notation or higher and that is they can request a sanction review to look at the sanctions and review if they were too severe or too harsh for the violation.

7) Explaining the implications of the outcome. – This step is important for the student because it gives the student an idea of what the implications from the process are. Penn State keeps a student's conduct record for up to 7 years after a student graduates but only reports out up to 3 years after a student graduates.

Any primary sanction that is a conduct warning or lower is not reported out on or off campus. Any primary sanction that is conduct probation or higher is reported out. On campus, colleges can request a disciplinary check in which if a student is on probation or higher, it would be reported to the college. The same goes with athletics, global

programming and international students, study abroad opportunities, etc. Typically a student cannot study abroad during the semester that they are on probation, however the policy has just recently changed to allow for a little more flexibility and to take into consideration the situation and the conduct officer's recommendation on the situation.

In order for the Office of Student Conduct to report a conduct record to an outside agency (employer, grad school, etc) OSC must have the consent of the student because the conduct record is part of the student's educational record and therefore protected under the Family Educational Rights to Privacy Act (FERPA).

During the last two semesters before a student graduates and after, a student who has a situation that is conduct probation or higher can request for external non-disclosure. External non-disclosure is only granted for low level offenses (using anything in the conduct probation range) and is an incentive to encourage students not to violate policy in the future. If the student's record is approved for external non-disclosure, it does not expunge the situations from a student's record, but it just means that Penn State will not report the situations out to external agencies such as grad school or an employer.

Before the student leaves, I like to remind them that I am an advocate for them and if they need anything or have any questions for them to reach out to me. If the student accepts the sanctions and charges, then it is important to monitor their progress on accomplishing sanctions. If a student doesn't complete a sanction, a hold is placed on their account and they cannot register for classes, get a transcript, etc.

For reflection papers, etc it is important to ready them thoroughly when a student completes the sanction and provide feedback/commentary for their reflection.

So this is the general flow of the conduct conversation and some things that I think about when working with the conduct conversation.

During my time in the Office of Student Conduct, I have definitely grown more comfortable in the conversation that I have with students and how I go about having that conversation. From this experience, I have changed how I talk about the conversation, the sanctions and charge code, I give students the chance to choose their charge code, and I have changed how I talk about Basics, UHS, and external non-disclosure.

I feel that the way I have the conversation now is more flexible and fluid and allows for a greater conversation between the student and myself. While shadowing and being shadowed by David, I was really challenged about the conversation. David recognized that I care about students and about their best interests at Penn State, but one thing that I struggled with in the conversation is the part about finding the student responsible. I would always say, “you are being found responsible for this violation and here are the sanctions.” David pointed out to me that the violation is an alleged violation until the student accepts responsibility for it. When you think about the situation overall, it makes sense. The goal of the process is for the student to accept responsibility for their actions and it is at that moment that the alleged violation becomes real. Therefore I am not find a student responsible (nor getting them in trouble) they are finding themselves responsible and making that choice to either accept or contest. It was a simple tweak in the conversation but has made all the difference in the meaningfulness of the conversation that I have with students.

Several other things that I learned about the conversation from David include explaining external non-disclosure. When I originally explained it, I understand that it was disjointed and part of that is because of a lack of my full understanding of external non-disclosure. Now that I have a better understanding of it and having watched David present it, I feel that I can explain it much better to students. I also saw David give the student the list of charge codes and have the student choose the charge code of the alleged violation. I have implemented this practice in my conduct conversations and I am very fond of how it has worked out. I think it gives the student the opportunity to see the code of conduct and to see that the code of conduct is not about feelings or bias, but that the violation is self-explanatory and written out plain and simple.

One thing I truly discovered is that the conduct conversation is hard. There are many different pieces to the conversation and so many different possible outcomes, questions or thoughts that could come from the conversation. With that, it is important to find your own groove and discover what works best for you when it comes to presenting all of the pieces of the conversation to a student.

SHARE →

Tweet

Like 0

Leave a Reply

You must be [logged in](#) to post a comment.