

The Musings of a Conduct Officer

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Values and Ethics

By smo17 On January 20, 2015 · [Add Comment](#)

What are values and how do your values inform ethical decisions? I think that this is a hard concept to talk about, and more importantly to teach to others. Sometimes I feel like speaking about values can be a very abstract idea, however understanding and analyzing what values and ethics are is an important process when it comes to Student Conduct.

In my time in Residence Life, I have had the opportunity at Penn State to work with, develop and implement a workshop that talks about values, ethics and decision-making. This experience has given me a deeper understanding of values and why they are important. Which has given me a better vision on how I discuss values and ethics with students. How can a student be held to a set of rules if they do not know what is important to them? Furthermore, how can a student know what is important to them without ever examining their values?

Values, in their most basic form, are intrinsic to each individual. Values are the beliefs that a person holds to be true about what is important to them. When thinking about Student Development, a student comes to college with a certain set of values or beliefs that they have about the world around them. Often times these values come from their family, their religious institutions, their community, society, friends, and other outside influences. As a student develops, it is important to encourage them to discover their own set of values. During college,

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student's value systems often come into conflict when they discover, interact with and experiment with things that might have been outside their comfort zone previously (sexual identity, alcohol, drugs, conflict, roommate interaction, social interactions, peer pressure, etc).

Ethics are standards or rules that govern a person or institution's values and decide what is "right" or "wrong" for that individual. For instance, society values life therefore an ethical standard or law that society has is that it is wrong to kill someone. Ethical rules or laws are governed by individual values. I always like to say that ethics are your values in practice.

Penn State has a list of values that they believe is important. These values guide the development of on campus rules such as the "Code of Conduct." The trick when talking about values and when talking to students about values is remembering that it is not our role as Student Affairs professional to tell students what it is they should value. It is really up to the student to discern what values are important to them.

I think when having the conduct conversation with a student, often times I interact with students that do not feel that their values were compromised in the situation that brought them to meet with me. This especially comes to mind when thinking about 15.07/15.08 In the Presence of Alcohol/Marijuana or even 6.08 Use or Possession of Marijuana. When I meet with students, I usually here commentary such as, "Well smoking marijuana does not hurt anyone, so I don't understand why I am getting in trouble. I could have done something far worse such as vandalize, etc" or "It is not illegal to be in the presence of alcohol downtown, why am I getting in trouble for that here on campus?"

The struggle in this situation is to remind students that it may not go against their values to smoke marijuana or to just be in the presence of alcohol/marijuana however as a member of the Penn State community, Penn State's values which are governed by the Code of Conduct says that smoking marijuana or being in the presence of marijuana or alcohol on campus is not acceptable behavior.

It is always important to recognize and point out to students that their values may differ from other people, and their beliefs may differ from Penn State as well, but the ethical standards of the Penn State community which they want to be a part of says that smoking marijuana is illegal and not valued on campus. Penn State does not force a student to come to the institution; therefore it is the student's choice to come to Penn State and to uphold Penn State's "Code of Conduct."

I think that this is frustrating for students as well as for conduct officers when it comes to having conversations, especially because to adequately discern what your values are could take a lifetime and conduct conversations are only 30 minutes to an hour. However I think that it is important to always have students reflect upon what is important to them, and how do their actions bring them closer to the ideal version of who they want to be. Some simple questions that you can ask to get students to think about this question are below:

- 1) Why did you come to Penn State?
- 2) What are some goals that you have in your life?
- 3) How do you think the situation that brought you here reflects upon who you are?
- 4) When you leave the Penn State community, what kind of legacy do you want to leave behind? What do you want people to say about you or how do you want to be remembered?

Oftentimes our Values are the outward representation of how we want people to view us. Ultimately, our values are something that we should wear on us everyday. I like to use the example of T-shirt. If you wear a t-shirt with the Nike logo on it, you are promoting the Nike company and what the Nike company stands for. If you wore a T-shirt with your values on it, you are promoting "YOU" and what "You" stand for.

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