

The Musings of a Conduct Officer

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Protected: Student Advocacy & the Message

By smo17 On April 20, 2015 · Add Comment

Student advocacy is extremely important in our job in student affairs, it is especially important in the work we do in student conduct. As a student conduct professional, you have to be able to challenge and support the student, advocate for the student as well as deliver the conduct message on behalf of the university.

And no matter how many times you can tell yourself, “You are not the one getting the student in trouble,” and that “their actions got them in trouble,” delivering the message can still be hard.

One thing I learned from my time in conduct during my internship is that I don’t think that I could handle conduct full-time as a career path. In meeting with students, I love the part of the conversation where you can really build rapport with the student and find out who they are, what brought them to Penn State, and what they are passionate about, but delivering the message of recommended sanctions can really pull at the heart-strings and no matter how long you have been doing conduct, the conversation where you have to hold the student accountable never gets easier.

I started the internship in conduct wanting to know the best practices for actually having the conduct conversation. At the end of the semester, I feel like I have a better grasp of the conversation, yet there

are 4 or 5 stories that really stick out in my mind from conversations with students this year.

First and foremost, when a student comes in to meet with you for conduct, you never know what that conversation is going to look like or how that conversation will develop. You never know what the student is going to talk about or what they are struggling with. In the conversation you ask leading questions to encourage them to talk and it always amazes me the connection you can create in just 15 minutes of questions about who they are, what they are passionate about, why they came to Penn State, what their Penn State experience has been like.

Also asking important questions about academics and giving them a chance to talk about the situation that brought them to meet with you and let them reflect upon that situation is extremely important.

This past year while working on an OSC decision making workshop, which although may be outside the scope of the conduct conversation, is still part of the larger conduct conversation setting, a student admitted that the student was at the workshop because of a fight that happened at a bar downtown. The student got into the fight because the student got riled up from a conversation that was taking place.

The student said that having the opportunity to talk about it and reflect upon the situation in the workshop, brought up some unresolved issues and that the student needed to talk to me about it.

So I talked to the student and the student informed me that last year the student had a girlfriend and the girlfriend ended up getting pregnant. The girlfriend chose to get an abortion and did not tell the student until after the fact. The girlfriend dropped out of Penn State and the student can no longer get ahold of her. The student was dealing with this baggage, which was precipitated by the conversation at the bar that caused the student to get angry which started the fight.

In this situation it is all about getting the student resources that they need to be able to get past the situation and move forward. It is about advocating for the student and making sure that the student gets what the student needs to be successful. Sometimes, you just have to put aside the reason why the student is there and address the most pressing issue at hand first. Our goal is to challenge and support not harm and hurt.

Another really hard conversation that I had to have with a student is about suspension. The student has been doing really well here academically and is really working hard on their academics, but the student has gotten into some trouble. (2 drug situations, 1 alcohol situation and theft). When the student came in to meet with me, I had to have the conversation about community and what it means to be a part of the Penn State Community. The student said that it means a lot and there is a lot of honor and pride in that and really trying to live up to the student's family expectations since all of the student's family had attended Penn State. I had to explain to the student that if the student violates another policy, the student would be suspended and not allowed to come back for the fall semester. I came to conduct to try and figure out how you have that conversation and what does that conversation look like, and I am leaving my conduct experiencing knowing that the conversation is much like every other conduct conversation (whether you are talking about an alcohol situation, suspension, theft, vandalism, drugs, etc). But what I have learned is that with each conversation, a piece of me is affected.

I hope that if I ever did go into conduct full time, I would never get into that mode where "you've heard it all," and you kind of build up a wall to stay emotionally disconnected from the situation. To me, every conduct case I have, I end up having some empathy for the student and regardless of how ever many times you say "the student's actions got them in trouble," you still cannot help but feeling like you are delivering the bad news.

This situation has definitely been proven true with another situation I had this semester. So Global Programs has a policy that you cannot study abroad if you are currently on probation. The policy in and of itself makes some sense. If you are on probation and you violate the code of conduct, the next step is suspension. If you are studying

abroad and you get suspended and have to come home, that not only looks bad on the individual student but also on Penn State. Another interesting factor is that usually when a student is placed on probation, it is from a situation involving alcohol and drugs. If a student has a problem of getting extremely intoxicated and transported to the hospital here in the US when the drinking age is 21, is sending a student abroad where the drinking age is lower, a good idea knowing they have a history of alcohol consumption?

Anyways, this year is the first year that Global Programs has changed their policy. Previously if you were on probation, you could not study abroad when you were currently on probation. This year they changed their policy and not only do they talk to the student and the case manager, but they take into consideration the entire conduct record of the student.

So I met with a student who was studying abroad in the summer. After meeting, the recommended sanctions were for two semesters. When the student realized that she couldn't study abroad in June, they had a break down in my office. They had already spent \$20,000 on the program and since 90 days had passed, the student could no longer cancel the trip.

So In the middle of the conversation, the student broke down and basically anything that I said after was just in one ear and out the other because the student was focused more on not studying abroad than anything else I had to say. Trying to comfort and support the student when they are in your office in tears, yet still trying to inform them of the recommended sanctions for their violation is a trying process that requires patience.

So I guess one of the things that I learned the most is that it is hard to find a balance between student advocacy and support, while challenging the student, especially when the outcomes can really affect the trajectory of the future of that student. However a conduct officer must always be prepared and ready for anything to happen in the conduct conversation.

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