

Final Reflection: Internship Office of Student Conduct

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Reflection of Learning: Office of Student Conduct Internship

Students do not typically look forward to their participation in a disciplinary conference. They are likely to enter the setting with trepidation and moist palms. I have to admit that I shared similar feelings when embarking upon my internship in The Office of Student Conduct. I was nervous about asking students to confront the poor choices they had made, and about challenging them to reflect upon their actions. I expected students to be in denial and resistant to conversation. However, just as most students who leave a disciplinary conference smiling and relieved, I also, have had a surprisingly rewarding learning experience.

My internship commenced with a training program well –grounded in introducing the mission and procedures of The Office of Student Conduct and how it operates at Penn State. It was made obvious right away that the unit’s mission was multi-faceted. In addition to striving to provide a safe and orderly community, the Office of Student Conduct (OSC) is committed to student growth and development. The main goal is to help each student recognize what is interfering with his or her decision-making and to help each reflect on the development of alternative choices. Reflection is encouraged through conversation and the use of administrative and educational sanctions. The discipline process often is accomplished through overlap with other functional areas on campus.

The Office of Student Conduct works closely with Residence Life in managing violations of the Code of Conduct. They also work in conjunction with the BASICS alcohol education program offered through University Health Services. Advisers and members of hearing boards come from all academic units on campus. There is an opportunity for students to become involved in OSC by joining the student conduct board. These students assist in the educative

mission of the office which presents at first-year seminars and other gatherings to help students Know the Code. They also serve as hearing officers. This background helped me to see how student affair units work together to accomplish larger goals of the mission of the university. Overlap was also obvious through the organizational structure of OSC. All of the six staff members are case managers, but each has responsibility for additional duties that are vital to the mission of the office. I was surprised at how few case managers there actually are, but I can also see how the unit is structured to work efficiently and effectively. I believe the work in OSC afforded me the opportunity to develop a keen understanding of this functional area and to also see how it interrelates with other units.

Student affairs offices typically strive to promote the growth and development of all students in the community. OSC is no exception. The backbone of this unit's work is meeting with students and leading conversations which support them through a time of dissonance and guide them to choices that will restore stability to their lives. These conversations provided a stellar opportunity to observe varying levels of student development.

Students who appear for disciplinary conferences range in age from first semester students to graduate students. Varying levels of psychosocial and moral development came to life before my eyes. Some students could not see beyond how the incident impacted and inconvenienced only them, while others were mortified that they had let their family down and also contributed to the well-publicized negative drinking culture of Penn State. My knowledge of the different levels of intellectual and ethical development was put to use by meeting students where they were developmentally, but also challenging them to think at a higher level. Knowledge and use of student development theory helped in my selection of sanctions that were appropriate to each individual's level of development.

Disciplinary conference conversations also allowed for the practice of many professional competencies. It was very important to me to put students at ease before beginning to discuss the violation they had allegedly committed. My knowledge of the academic side of the academy and my natural curiosity about students made it very easy to develop a comfortable rapport with students. By the time we got to the tough talk a small, but important, basis of trust had been established.

I found it imperative to be an active listener. Students felt anxious and retelling the events that led to the infraction from their perspective was very important to them. Mediation, of sorts, was also put to use in many instances. It was important to mediate for the university community and help the student recognize why the Code of Conduct was necessary in the first place. Often this larger concept of Penn State being a community and a need to respect all the members was foreign to students, especially first semester students. Since I encountered several international students who violated the code, cross cultural communication naturally came into play. I had excellent conversations with students who came from varying cultural backgrounds and struggled to fit in, at times mimicking the behaviors they saw around them which led to violations. I found myself also needing to empathize and use compassion when talking with students and/or parents who felt that traumatic events from the past were contributing to the students' lack of good judgment. This internship was a marvelous opportunity and very well timed with CSA 597A: Helping Skills for Student Affairs Professionals. It allowed me to immediately put skills to practice in real life settings.

In meeting with students, I had many opportunities to use my knowledge of social justice and was very careful to be aware of any bias of mine that may interfere with the disciplinary conference. I tried to gain an understanding of the student's background and how it may have

played a role in the infraction. The use of privilege and power often came into play in conversations, as students often did not agree with the way the police had written details about their behavior in the incident reports. While the details never impacted the outcome or the selection of sanctions in the cases I saw, they did play an important role in the students' perception of the authority figure as untruthful. It was hard to listen to their concerns and not have evidence to support either side. I always explained they had the right to contest the charges and request a hearing, but this was often too large of a time commitment or inconvenience for the student. This gray area of the work was difficult for me, and an area in which I still need continued reflection and practice.

Thus, the internship did provide ways for me to continue to develop both inter and intra-personally. I had to evaluate many times whether I was being too easy on students or too friendly with them in a situation that required more gravity. I learned that I was able to enjoy guiding conversations that required students to recognize their need for change. I came to feel comfortable asking the tougher questions that were necessary to help students face their failings and decide to move forward positively. It was very rewarding to lead students to discover that while they made a mistake, the learning and growth that resulted from it could be a real positive for their future. I recognize and appreciate that I was given leeway to self-manage my cases under the direction of my supervisor. She was always present for discussion, but encouraged me to develop my own choices based on the facts of the case and what it appeared would best help the student.

One critical area of learning that was not obvious in OSC during my internship was that of research and assessment. My supervisor did make me aware that she attended a professional conference for conduct workers last summer. She also shared with me a very interesting book

about a new model of conduct that was developed at the University of Michigan. Thus, I am aware that there is a culture of scholarship and research in the field, but I did not see it in action in the OSC at Penn State. There was no evidence of specific student learning outcomes or formal or informal assessment tools in use.

On the other hand, my own research interest of student decision-making was very much at play in the daily workings of case managers. One educational sanction allows for students to attend a decision-making workshop or complete a decision-making module to help them reflect on the process they employ when making choices. I attended one of the two hour workshops to observe the process and also developed some individual decision making worksheets. These should eventually be available on the OSC shared drive for case managers to use as sanctions. The worksheets were based on readings that I completed on my own as part of an informal project for the internship.

In summary, I found the Office of Student Conduct to be a rich environment in which to further develop the learning outcomes of College Student Affairs. The opportunity to interact with students in a meaningful and intentional manner is part of the daily fabric of the work. The culture demands that students be supported, but also challenged to grow and develop. All of the tenets of good student affairs practice are at play with the exception of visible learning outcomes and the tools to assess them. This is an area in which I do have significant experience so do not feel this detracted from my overall learning at this internship site.