The Chronicle of Higher Education: How One University Went All-In on Restorative Justice

By Katherine Knott | Oct. 18, 2016

Gabriella Lanzi, a junior at the University of Michigan, has spent the past two years of college immersed in conflict. But she doesn't mind.

As a student facilitator in Michigan's Office of Student Conflict Resolution, her job is to help her fellow students navigate disputes either with their peers or, if they may have violated a university rule, with the institution itself.

Many colleges have embraced restorative justice, an approach to student conduct that helps offenders find a way to repair the harm they've caused. But few have bought into the concept as thoroughly as Michigan. The concept of restorative justice permeates the conflict-resolution office and university housing. The student-body president says it even informs what student government does.

Restorative justice is not always effective or appropriate — especially in cases of sexual misconduct, which are still handled by Michigan's Office for Institutional Equity. But restorative practices can address a wide range of issues, including alcohol violations and vandalism. Instead of delivering strong punishments, the practices are aimed at righting wrongs and repairing relationships through conversation.

As student discipline continues to evolve from a judicial system to a more-informal set of resolution practices, Michigan's approach could become a model for other institutions looking to change their conduct policies.

Officials and student leaders say that, by and large, the process works. In Ms. Lanzi's time at the office, she has found that students are "pleasantly surprised" when they realize the university wants to work with them. "If they mess up their first time freshman year, it's not necessarily going to set the tone for the rest of their time at the university," she said.

Walking Through Pathways

Ryan Holmes, a former president of the Association for Student Conduct Administration who is assistant vice president for student support at the University of Texas at El Paso, said Michigan has been "a pioneer" in moving past the judicial model to one that's more restorative.

Michigan's Office of Student Conflict Resolution moved toward a restorative approach in 2008. The director at the time, Jennifer Schrage, devised a model that provides students with a spectrum of options to resolve a conflict, ranging from informal discussion to formal hearings. The office refers to each option as a conflict-resolution pathway. Ms. Schrage wrote in an email that the model grew out of a desire "to provide a campus conflict-response system that reflected the diverse needs of our diverse student body and accounted for systems of power, privilege, and oppression."

Here's how that might play out in the real world. If two roommates are locked in a dispute over who does the dishes, they could appeal to the office for help. They'd meet with a student facilitator, who would walk them through the different pathways. They might receive conflict coaching that offers them tools to help them work the issue out on their own. But if the roommates were really at odds, a facilitated dialogue — in which an office staff member mediates the discussion — might be more

appropriate. Another option could be a "shuttle negotiation," in which a student facilitator acts as a go-between to find a mutually agreeable solution.

For students accused of violating university policies, the office offers them different options to resolve the complaint. They can choose to do so voluntarily — a process that requires them to take responsibility for their actions — and then participate in a facilitated conversation to discuss the situation. But if a student doesn't want to take responsibility or wants to contest a complaint, then the office turns to a formal adjudication process. Ninety percent of cases are resolved voluntarily; those cases do not end up on a student's university record.

The pathways approach is also used when students violate the university's alcohol policy. The conflict-resolution office's website advises students to "be prepared to have a meaningful discussion about your incident, your alcohol and/or other drug use, as well as your general experiences as a member of the University community."

Erik Wessel, the director of the conflict-resolution office, said the process creates a "high level of buy-in" because students are involved in drafting their own sanctions. "Students, by and large, are much more likely to live into the educational measures that we have established with them because they have been a part of the process determining what those are," he said.

David Schafer, a senior and president of Michigan's Central Student Government, learned about Michigan's approach to restorative justice at the end of his freshman year as he became more involved on campus. He bought into the concept because he believes it's more constructive than a default to court-style proceedings.

Has the process worked? The Office of Student Conflict Resolution doesn't have concrete data, but Mr. Wessel says it has seen lower recidivism rates since 2008, meaning the office doesn't see many repeat offenders.

Mr. Wessel attributes the low rates to the role of students as peer facilitators in the resolution process.

'Planting the Seed'

Ms. Lanzi, who is one of those peer facilitators, didn't realize the university's approach was unorthodox until she went through training for the role. At first-year orientation sessions, students hear a bit about the office and conflict resolution, she said. But they don't necessarily think about what's going to happen if they find themselves at odds with another student or with the university.

Ms. Lanzi now studies social theory and practice, minors in social work, and carries around a wallet-sized conflict guide, which she said she has been known to "whip out."

Students can be a little surprised, she said, when they find out that it's another student who will be working with them. But then she explains why the university makes peer facilitators the cornerstones of the office.

"We're the ones that get it," she said. "We are in classes with them and see the same issues. We have context about what students are going through."

Mallory Martin-Ferguson, an associate director in the housing division who deals with student conduct and conflict resolution, is an advocate of the restorative-justice model. Her job includes

managing conduct cases in university housing as well as educating people on the restorative approach. For her, conduct issues aren't about issuing a punishment or assessing a fine. They're about the student connecting with those in their community and rebuilding relationships, which requires conversation and can be a challenge.

"We do struggle because students these days aren't used to really talking to each other face-to-face, so there's some resistance and barriers to being willing to engage with each other in that way," she said. "This really requires students to be present in a different way."

The restorative-justice approach is a process, she said, and one hour-long meeting won't effect all the change needed when a student errs. "But we are planting a seed, and we're helping them see that they are accountable and responsible not only for themselves and their behavior but also to the folks in their community," she said.

Mr. Wessel, of Office of Student Conflict Resolution, acknowledges that what works in Ann Arbor might not work somewhere else. But he said that each year the office receives more and more calls from colleagues interested in learning about Michigan's approach to conflict resolution through restorative practices.

"Because the restorative approach aligns so nicely with the student-development perspective," he said, "I believe we will continue to see growth nationally."