

Jennifer Meyer Schrage contends that adjudication-only models of conflict resolution limit opportunities for restorative justice and student learning, for both those who have caused harm and those who have suffered harm. She advances the multipronged Spectrum Model as a more appropriate model for serving all stakeholders' needs.

By Jennifer Meyer Schrage

A Sea Change on the Horizon: Transforming Our Students and Campuses through Innovative Conflict Management

AN AFRICAN PROVERB DECLARES that “smooth seas do not make skillful sailors.” One interpretation of this adage is that the storms of life develop character and competence. Having grown up in a city often referred to as the “Valley of the Sun,” my full understanding of this metaphor did not take shape until my first visit to the mountains of northern Arizona. I was a child and my father took me fishing in a small boat on a lake. The lake was large, actually bearing the name “Big Lake.” We set out in the morning with the sun shining and enjoyed some great fishing. The daily afternoon mountain thunderstorms, however, soon threatened overhead, and before long, a sprinkle turned to a downpour as my father paddled to shore. Soon it began to hail and I was scared. My father, however, gave me a smile and remained calm until we were soon at the dock. He weathered the storm with such grace and confidence that I knew

I was safe, even as the lightning appeared in the sky and the waves raged around me.

Often, our experience with conflict is a lot like the afternoon mountain thunderstorm. We know it is inevitable, and yet it still catches us off guard. Despite the known rhythm of nature, we bask in the sun of our relationships so that when the clouds appear, with a misstep, disagreement, or misunderstanding, we find ourselves startled. Depending on our dominant conflict style and tendency to be self-reflective (or lack thereof), we calibrate a response that either offers growth, stagnation, or destruction. We either pick up the paddles to do the work to get the relationship back to solid ground or wallow in the sea of misery, passively or actively assisting in sinking the boat.

If we embrace the African proverb, then we appreciate that the ability to gracefully navigate the storms of conflict is a lifelong skill. Making a mistake

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and experiencing conflict is a gift. If college is the “pond” for the “ocean of life,” it is much better to sink the boat in shallow waters with a team of qualified educators at the ready than to have your navigation skills first tested when your career or livelihood is on the line.

DEVELOPING CONFLICT COMPETENCY DURING COLLEGE

EXPERIENCING A MAJOR CONFLICT in college is valuable not only because the consequences are usually less intense but also because, *if managed well*, it provokes meaningful student learning. Often, educators can offer coaching and modeling that sets a student on a path of personal reflection and growth that can disrupt dysfunctional habits modeled in our larger culture. The power of a positive and healthy experience that comes with successfully resolving conflict during college creates opportunities for self-awareness and personal growth that can last a lifetime.

The roommate dispute over a lost sweatshirt; the choice to engage in alcohol or other drugs in violation of one’s own personal values and the law; the loss of a job or other relationship due to offensive behavior or improprieties with social media; and the choice to lie, cheat, or steal are all conflicts. These incidents represent conflicts with self, others, the community, and individual and campus values. Such conflicts are, perhaps, the most important learning moments of college.

Regardless of our role on campus, we are all in the same boat as educators when it comes to conflict: Student conflict is part of our work. We all find ourselves

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either facilitating resolution directly, managing issues arising from conflict, referring students to campus and community resources, or encouraging healthy conflict in our classroom discussions. Or perhaps we are in direct conflict with a student. As we reflect on this area of “conflict work” with students, we must consider whether we are effective from a student learning perspective.

Do we provide calm for students and space for grace in the eye of the personal storm that surrounds conflict? Or do we intensify a student’s dilemma by introducing or modeling adversarial or formalistic systems of response?

THE EYE OF THE STORM

CONSIDER, FOR EXAMPLE, the all-too-common campus experience of a student organization deciding to host a party with a “__ist” theme (sexist, racist, hetero-sexist, etc.). Because it is often the “perfect storm” of conflict in the academic setting, a reflection of a typical campus response to such a scenario is helpful in considering whether the traditional conduct and conflict management system is aligned with the guiding principles espoused by most educators.

The traditional response to students in the eye of this storm (both those responsible for the harm and those affected by the harm) is often messy and legalistic and rarely managed well so that everybody walks away whole. Assertions of privacy rights, First Amendment considerations, and technical readings of policy and code violations sink any hopes for real learning and growth (not to mention compassion) and ring as shallow in the larger community conversation around such a conflict. A typical response is likely highly adversarial, formal, and involves quick and swift group sanction (with little room for any individual engagement). Individuals responsible for doing harm take a defensive stance and “lawyer up” in fear of disciplinary action and other punitive treatment, while those harmed are pushed out of the direct dialogue because there is no appropriate space for their voice according to official policy and procedures.

Such a response may be in alignment with policy and current paradigms of proper compliance, but does

this traditional response (1) promote student learning, (2) honor access and ensure a climate of diversity, and (3) make space for the voice of the community harmed by the incident while also preserving important student rights and risk management concerns? Does such a response reach out to our students with the life preserver of understanding, challenge, and support? In the eye of the storm, do we get our students back in their boat and hand them the compass and map, or do we leave them behind to fend for themselves?

STUDENT LEARNING AND CONFLICT

SEEKING TO PROMPT MORE dialogue around the topic of student learning and conflict, in 2009 Nancy Geist Giacomini and I coedited *Reframing Campus Conflict: Student Conduct Practice through a Social Justice Lens*. This publication brought together voices from various roles in higher education across the country to consider a model for campus conflict management that more effectively honored education's core mission of student learning while respecting social and restorative justice (without disrespecting the important role of student rights and risk management).

In *Reframing Campus Conflict*, Simone Himbeault Taylor and Donica Thomas Varner bring to this dialogue the voices of higher education's executive leadership, legal affairs practitioners, and academics. Their chapter, titled "When Law and Student Learning Merge to Create Educational Student Conflict Resolution and Effective Conduct Management Programs," outlines both the theoretical and legal foundations for evolving campus conflict response systems to become less formal and adjudicatory and more agile and adaptable.

From a student learning perspective, Taylor and Varner cite decades of theory to demonstrate how campus models that provide space for less adversarial conflict resolution, like mediation and facilitated dialogue programs, affirm principles of self-authorship and moral, ethical, and social identity development.

Taylor and Varner assert that if we, as educators, desire to challenge our students to become "self-authored," our systems must make room for this growth in response to conflict. When conflict occurs, we must endeavor to stand at the shore and allow students to navigate the waters. At other times, the risks

may require that we be in the boat with them as a coach or guide, helping them to steer themselves to safety. There will be times that the matter calls for our taking control and driving the final result, but this should be a last resort rather than the first. Taylor and Varner challenge the education community to develop staff and invest resources to construct more sophisticated systems of response to student conflict that provide educators with this flexibility and improve competency, character, and capacity.

Theory and best practice are calling to our profession and asking us to step into what feels like murky waters as we learn that a system promoting "self-authorship" in the face of conflict is a system that turns away from the dogmatic (yet safe) territory of policies based on a model of black and white. Experience is asking us to embrace and elegantly navigate "the gray" of response processes that promote adaptable conflict management pathways. Such pathways lead to spaces for real dialogue outside of formal hearings and inside circles where solutions are not always clear but they are always owned by those who are responsible for harm and accepted and respected by those harmed by a conflict.

In the case of the harmful and thoughtless student party that rips a community apart, is our profession up to such a test? How can educators act with integrity, honor ethical and legal obligations, and still construct a process that is educational and restorative for all involved?

A SPECTRUM OF RESOLUTION OPTIONS FOR CAMPUS CONFLICT

ONE ANSWER TO THIS CHALLENGE is a spectrum-based approach to responding to campus conflict. In *Reframing Campus Conflict*, the Spectrum Model is explored in depth in "Providing a Spectrum of Resolution Options." In this chapter, colleague Monita C. Thompson and I explain how in 2008 we developed the Spectrum Model with other colleagues at the University of Michigan to provide language and framework for the field to consider evolving from a rigid rules-based approach for conflict management to becoming a community of practitioners prepared to implement complex systems of conflict response. This spectrum-based approach offers campuses a

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model for empowering individual educators with more adaptable and restorative avenues for resolving student conflict matters. The model also engages individual educators as active participant-facilitators in a community-owned and collaborative conflict management system.

The Spectrum Model offers a full menu of conflict resolution options. In traditional conflict management systems, an educator seeking support in addressing a student conflict matter might be faced with one option, which is to file a complaint and adjudicate the matter within a formal conduct policy. If the matter is not considered to be a formal violation of the conduct policy, educators are often left with no other formal support from the institution. Similarly, if the educator desires a less adversarial approach, they are left on their own in resolving the matter. A spectrum-based approach offers adjudication as only one pathway on a broader menu of options, which also offers less adversarial and more restorative and facilitative options for managing a conflict.

The Spectrum Model, as the name indicates, offers a visual display of a continuum of pathway options for educators and students to pursue as they resolve a conflict and/or conduct incident. This continuum offers the following resolution pathways:

1. *No Conflict Management.* Administration intentionally refrains from initiating involvement in a campus conflict.
2. *Dialogue.* Parties engage in a conversation to gain understanding or manage a conflict independent of administrator intervention or third-party facilitation.
3. *Conflict Coaching.* Students receive guidance from administration in order to engage a conflict more effectively and independently.
4. *Facilitated Dialogue.* Similar to dialogue, but in a facilitated dialogue, parties maintain ownership of decisions concerning the conversation or any resolution of a conflict.
5. *Mediation.* Parties access administration to serve as a third party to coordinate a

structured session aimed at resolving a conflict and/or constructing a future story for the parties involved.

6. *Restorative Justice Practices (such as conferences, circles, and boards).* Through a “diversion program” or as an addition to the adjudication process, administration provides space and facilitation services for students taking ownership for harmful behavior and those parties affected by the behavior to jointly construct an agreement to repair harm.
7. *Shuttle Diplomacy.* Administration actively negotiates an agreement between two parties that do not wish to directly engage with one another. This method may be an alternative to a formal adjudication process or part of the conduct code process.
8. *Adjudication (informal resolution).* Using the conduct code process, administration meets with the accused student to resolve the incident. An informal resolution is achieved when the student accepts responsibility and agrees to fulfill ordered sanctions. A discipline record is kept of any code violations.
9. *Adjudication (formal resolution).* Using the code process outlined in conduct policy, administration facilitates a formal process that includes a hearing. A third party (panel or staff member) determines whether a conduct code violation occurred and issues sanctions in the case. A discipline record is kept of any code violations.

Pathways listed at the beginning of the Spectrum are party driven, with administration serving only as a coach for students exploring conflict resolution. Parties electing a pathway in the center of the Spectrum seek administrators to serve as third-party facilitators but not as decision makers. It is only at the right end of the Spectrum that parties surrender decision making, as the administrator becomes an arbiter issuing decisions of responsibility in the adjudication process.

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SOCIAL AND RESTORATIVE JUSTICE AND THE SPECTRUM MODEL

MANY OF THESE SPECTRUM pathways are not only less adversarial, but also more restorative for all involved. In *Reframing Campus Conflict*, authors Andrea Goldblum and David Karp each devoted a chapter to the topic of Restorative Justice. Both reinforce the Spectrum Model as a vehicle for offering more restorative avenues for conflict management.

In “Restorative Justice from Theory to Practice,” Goldblum explains the guiding principles, origins, and history of Restorative Justice in the United States. As Goldblum notes, this indigenous practice for peacemaking has been inspiring reforms in criminal justice systems and later campus judicial programs since the 1970s. Restorative Justice is a community framework that views wrongdoing as (1) primarily a violation of people and relationships as opposed to laws and policies; and (2) an opportunity to repair harm done to affected individuals (including the offender) and communities, rather than a venue for punishment. As such, Restorative Justice interventions and associated practices prioritize creating collaborative space for the voices of those harmed to be heard and emphasize restoration and individual responsibility over formalistic and/or adversarial processes. Goldblum and Karp outline proposed approaches that reside on the continuum of responses available in a spectrum-based campus conflict management program.

In addition to empowering individual educators managing student conflicts with access to a variety of more restorative resolution pathways (to refer a student to or to utilize themselves), the spectrum-based approach to conflict response also more effectively honors social justice and diversity. In fact, social justice provides the foundation for the model. Monita C. Thompson and I developed the model with a vision for deconstructing the dominant narrative that pervades traditional campus conflict management programs. The Spectrum Model honors the full continuum of social identities, cultures, and experiences that exist on campuses today. The model minimizes marginalization by

allowing parties to select pathways that resonate for them, depending on a participant’s lens and experience. For example, informed by a cultural perspective that emphasizes harmony, a student may prefer a more informal venue such as mediation to resolve a conflict with another student. Likewise, a party may desire the structured approach of adjudication given the sensitive nature of the incident at issue. The Spectrum Model creates access because all community members may see themselves and their personal conflict style in the continuum of options.

The Spectrum Model also offers infrastructure for institutions seeking to develop more collaborative and community-owned student conflict management programs. Offering a full menu of conflict resolution pathways creates space for engagement by all community stakeholders, including staff, faculty, and students in the development and maintenance of the program. Faculty, staff, and students can serve as referrals as well as facilitators. With proper training, for example, a faculty member may be paired with a student to serve as a mediator for a dispute. By utilizing students, faculty, and staff as mediators or facilitators, programs expand the portfolio of conflict experts on campus. This increases awareness of resources and services (increasing the possibility of engaging a conflict early) and ensures a diverse pool of mediators and facilitators available to assist as issues arise. A spectrum-based approach offers a community-owned conflict management program with relevancy, capacity, and diversity.

TRANSFORMATION THROUGH THE TEMPEST

REIMAGINE THE POSSIBLE OUTCOMES of the storm created by the bigoted behavior of students at a party on campus when an institution responds with a spectrum-based approach. Rather than drifting into preoccupation with issues of freedom of expression or policy violations, a campus using a spectrum-based approach will have tools and pathways for managing the conflict in a way that calms the waters and focuses primarily on learning. Perhaps, by participating in a

restorative conference or circle, preceded by shuttle diplomacy, the affected students (those harming and affected by harm) and other members of the community find their way to a group-facilitated dialogue (that is both careful and compassionate). In this safe space that is free from punitive measures, transformation occurs while students express themselves, own their behavior, say “sorry,” and cocreate a way to move forward and repair the harm done.

The Spectrum Model approach to campus conflict is a model for today’s campus. As educators learn of this model, a sea change is on the horizon, with more and more campuses moving away from traditional “adjudication-only” programs. Our profession is transforming as we appreciate that a campus offering a full menu for managing conflict better serves today’s diverse students, interests, and experiences.

IMPLEMENTATION EXPERIENCES WITH THE SPECTRUM MODEL

GIVEN THE MODEL’S RELEVANCE and growing interest in the field, University of Michigan colleague Jay Wilgus and I developed and conducted a survey in early 2013 with members of the Association of Student Conduct Administration (ASCA). Ninety-four institutions participated. Eighty-two percent of institutions surveyed were using the model or exploring it.

We presented the results together in March 2013 in an ASCA webinar titled “Campus Conduct and Conflict Management through a Social and Restorative Justice Lens: The Spectrum Model’s Revolution and Evolution.” Our presentation explored themes gained from the survey regarding current campus programming efforts and experiments infusing practices and pathways introduced in the Spectrum Model framework. Campuses using the model described desired learning outcomes for students that included skill building, understanding campus values, awareness of impact on others, improved decision making, and active engagement in the university community. Reasons given for using the model included the flexibility of the process, the model’s responsiveness to various needs and interests, increased satisfaction for

participants, reduction in recidivism, active participation of parties, and increased student engagement and learning.

Campuses described various benefits of implementing the model. These benefits included improved relationships among campus stakeholders, expanded understanding of campus conflict programming, the ability to resolve incidents at a lower level, greater satisfaction with incident resolutions, and increased opportunities for learning and development.

Campuses also identified cultural, staff, and resource challenges associated with implementation of the Spectrum Model. For example, institutions struggled with campus norms that support an adjudicatory and punishment model and an unwillingness to “live in the grey” that some of the pathways in the model present. Also, lack of awareness and buy-in from the community and supervisors presented additional challenges for some campuses. Campuses were also transparent about capability and capacity concerns, noticing that staff members sometimes lack the skills and time necessary for proper implementation of the model. Finally, campuses expressed frustration with lack of resources, including the inability to garner necessary financial and space requirements for proper facilitation of some of the pathways on the Spectrum.

Campuses that were interested in the model but were not yet applying it named various reasons for the stall. Reasons for delay included prohibitive campus policies, unsupportive institutional culture, lack of resources, or limited staff capability or capacity. Relatedly, campuses uninterested in the model noticed the same concerns in addition to direct opposition by leadership, preoccupation with compliance considerations, or lack of awareness of the model.

NAVIGATING UNCHARTED WATERS

AS THESE DATA INDICATE, implementation of a spectrum-based approach is difficult work, but navigating the waters of campus conduct and conflict management has always been challenging. As campuses using a spectrum-based approach are just planting the seeds of this new approach to programming, the winds of change are shifting again with what threatens to be the

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With each step, advocates for a Spectrum Model must be prepared to make the case for proper staffing, professional development, space, and other resources to ensure that pathways are implemented with integrity.

onset of a new era of “The Compliance University,” according to Robert D. Bickel and Peter F. Lake in a 2013 second edition of their 1999 book, *The Rights and Responsibilities of the Modern University: Who Assumes the Risks of College Life?* Bickel and Lake caution educators to notice the darkening clouds overhead that are increasing regulation and burdensome legislative mandates.

In this climate of compliance and an energized return to rules and restrictions, the Spectrum Model remains as relevant and important as ever. In the thunder of lawyers’ arguments and the flurry of policy pages, a spectrum-based program, built with thoughtful care and structure, offers educators an anchor and a clear view of the true north of student learning.

In the current climate, building a spectrum-based program (like navigating any sea of change) requires commitment. Advice from years of personal experience and consultation with campuses nationwide on how to successfully make this journey can be distilled into three primary guidelines: (1) prepare for the journey, (2) locate the bearings, and (3) be careful docking at the destination.

Preparing for the Journey. Shifting from a program with only one pathway (adjudication) to one with many alternative resolutions requires intentional and careful work in the early planning stages.

At the 2013 Ghering Academy’s Conflict Resolution Seminar, Ryan Holmes notes, “In my experience in developing spectrum-based approaches to campus conflict with various institutions, I have learned that no two campuses are the same.” Holmes is former president of the ASCA and current associate dean of students and director for the Office of Student Conduct and Conflict Resolution at the University of Texas at El Paso (UTEP).

Prior to his work at UTEP, Holmes led a mediation initiative at LaSalle University in Pennsylvania. Holmes explains that “program developers must respect that there are several steps to building a spectrum-based approach and it is hard, time-consuming work.”

It is not uncommon for innovators like Holmes, eager to expand programming on campus, to include a full spectrum of conflict resolution options, to experience the agony of what feels like ongoing delay.

A robust and lasting program, however, requires methodical planning and preparation.

In the first stages of preparation, buy-in from institutional leadership is key. Without the support of executive leaders, legal affairs, and key partner units at the frontlines of working with students in conflict, attempts at a Spectrum Model program will most certainly hit a dead-end. The publication of *Reframing Campus Conflict* was inspired in part by a desire to assist innovators in the field in building understanding at higher levels in the institution. With *Reframing Campus Conflict* and other supporting literature, program developers can now cite theory and practice as affirmation for making this institutional shift in policy.

Once initial buy-in occurs, program developers must develop a critical mass of campus stakeholders with not just a shared understanding of what it means to respond to conflict with a spectrum of resolution options (such as mediation, negotiation, and restorative conferences) but knowledge about how to do it. Often, this means hosting trainings for faculty, staff, and students. While this training may occur in-house via a law school or other faculty member, it may also require engaging outside training teams with expertise in conflict studies.

I assisted one campus by conducting a four-day training on the core “conciliation framework” and basic facilitator competencies that lie at the heart of each of the pathways. The program director leading the development of the campus’s revised conflict resolution program strategically invited colleagues from all over campus to this training, focusing on close stakeholders in student affairs such as housing, counseling, and student organization support. Together, this group transformed their understanding of effective conflict management that is socially just, restorative, and educational. Following the core training, this group was equipped with basic facilitator skills and ready for additional training specific to the skills required for each of the pathways (to be completed at another time and in shorter segments).

Following the initial efforts of building support among leadership and stakeholder development, the next step in preparation is an examination and pos-

sible revision of conduct policy and practices. Simple, yet important, conduct policy language must articulate the legitimacy of alternative (or adaptable) conflict resolution (ACR) pathways. Similar to such ACR language in employment and other contracts, the institution must state that conflicts may be dealt with in diversionary pathways, such as mediation, in order to appropriately implement a spectrum-based approach. Once the leaders, stakeholders, and policies and practices are in alignment with a spectrum-based approach, programs are ready to set sail for implementation.

Locating the Bearings. Like mariners who use the stars to navigate the ocean, program leaders must look to the guiding principles and core values of the institution to support innovation and sustain necessary changes. Those with experience executing the Spectrum Model will agree that the theory of the model's ideal and the reality of application on a specific campus can feel worlds apart. Every campus is different, and successful program leaders will be careful to adjust approaches to respect a campus's culture, needs, and, sometimes, budget. This means that success may be defined by the choice to move slowly and start with adding a single pathway of mediation or infuse restorative methods into the existing adjudicatory infrastructure. With each step, advocates for a Spectrum Model must be prepared to make the case for proper staffing, professional development, space, and other resources to ensure that pathways are implemented with integrity.

"I have experienced substantial changes in resources and support when we as educators firmly and clearly align proposals to the university's guiding principles and communicate effectively how new pathways and responses to conflict honor the core values and mission of the university," says Keith Anderson, dean of students at Liberty University, at the Ghering Academy's Conflict Resolution Seminar. Under Anderson's leadership, Liberty University evolved from an "adjudication-only" program to a spectrum-based menu wherein a significant portion of cases are managed through restorative justice pathways.

"Once our team understood where we were headed and why, all of the pieces came together," adds Anderson.

Docking at the Destination. The work is not complete upon arrival at the destination. Bringing the vessel to shore requires dropping the anchor on good holding ground and accounting for future changes in the climate. The Spectrum Model was developed at the University of Michigan. Within five years of its

implementation, the central unit responsible for it experienced a transition in leadership. Shortly thereafter, the aforementioned climate of compliance grabbed hold of the broader field of student conduct and conflict management. Jay Wilgus was the leader of the University of Michigan program at this time. Just as Wilgus stepped aboard to take the wheel, the boat began to rock.

"A primary focus of my work over the past three and a half years has been finding a way to comply with new federal mandates while also remaining true to the commitment to infuse social and restorative justice approaches into all the work we do with students," says Wilgus at the Ghering Academy's Conflict Resolution Seminar.

Promoting informality and more space for dialogue in an environment preoccupied with compliance is difficult but not impossible. In fact, for real innovators, challenge breeds creativity. Wilgus and others have crafted new approaches and evolved existing structures to respect legal and ethical boundaries while remaining anchored in a spectrum-based approach. A program properly anchored will not drift when winds temporarily shift.

CONCLUSION

IT IS APPARENT THAT OUR PROFESSION continues to experiment with innovation in campus conflict management and navigate the challenges that come with an ever-changing environment. A spectrum-based approach to campus conflict, while more complex, offers meaningful and educational pathways that improve student learning and campus climate and is therefore well worth the investment of resources and the challenge of weathering the administrative storms that come with countercultural moves.

More restorative and socially just institutional frameworks and infrastructures for responding to conflict offer students comfort in the eye of their own personal storms. When we move toward grace and confidence in the face of conflict, our students will follow. In doing so, we create more space for reflection—and it is only in the space of individual reflection that the learning moment arises. In this calm, students discover that they are their own captains and that while the waters rage and the clouds move in, the shore is on the horizon and solid ground awaits.

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