

Student Voices on Restorative Justice in Student Conduct in Higher Education

Adriana Gonzalez ♦ California Lutheran University ♦ 2021

The Problem

The “Zero-Tolerance” approach instilled within the U.S. education system has resulted in a school-to-prison pipeline. This is seen in higher education within Student Conduct through punitive sanctions (probation, suspension, expulsion) that push students out. **This is a problem because it does not contribute towards providing students with a learning experience that provides reflection and reduces repetitive, negative behaviors in the future.**

- Those who suffer most from these punitive measures in education are hindered by their ability to fulfill educational goals. These includes Black, Latinx, Native American, LGBTQ+ students, male students, students with disabilities, and English language learners (Sandwick, Hahn, & Ayoub)

Assigning sanctions rooted in Restorative Justice leads to more reflective and educational experiences for students without punitive outcomes.

Purpose of the Study

It is important to identify methods to increase support for providing Restorative Justice practices that allow for undergraduate students' development to positively take place, rather than punitive outcomes that hinder holistic student success. **Research shows there is a connection between students who receive severe punishments, such as suspension or expulsion, and a future of under-education, unemployment, and incarceration, as well as an increased probability of arrest, conviction, and incarceration that impacts minority students most (Scott, 2017).**

The purpose of this study is to:

- identify how students perceive and define Restorative Justice
- explore students' thoughts and receptiveness to intentional forms of sanctioning rather than punitive sanctions
- showcase the importance of assigning sanctions that foster growth through educational experiences

Methodology

This study examined undergraduate **students' perspectives and thoughts on Restorative Justice and Student Conduct, in Higher Education**. The design used for this study was a **qualitative**, phenomenological method using **two focus groups** via Zoom with questions seeking students' understanding of Student Conduct and Restorative Justice. There was a total of 5 participants (3 juniors, 1 sophomore, 1 senior) who were Resident Assistants, University Hearing Board Peer members, and/or student government representatives. The data analysis encompassed inductive analysis to reduce the volume of information collected by identifying and organizing the data into patterns and themes. The audio was transcribed and reviewed to identify key patterns and themes using a coding scheme.

Research Question: What is undergraduate students' understanding of student conduct and how it fits within the institution? How do students define restorative justice? What aspects of restorative justice would students be willing to participate in within their student conduct offices?

Results

Students feel the **purpose of student conduct** is to:

- provide awareness of one's impact on the community
- ensure safety
- provide educational, developmental learning

Students' **perceptions of student conduct**:

- are grounded in negative feelings (anxiety, fear, frustration) due to not fully understanding the conduct process itself
- should be more intentional in relaying information

Students' **perspectives and understanding of Restorative Justice** is positive, and shows receptiveness to participating in Restorative Justice practices. Students' **preference for Restorative Justice** sanctions rather than punitive sanctions:

- provides more growth and learning opportunities following mistakes
- provides all parties necessary support and resources

Implications

Student Conduct needs to be more intentional and thorough about how they share their policies and processes with students before they arrive to campus.

- This involves concrete plans for helping students truly understand policies, and processes in place.

In addition, students are receptive to engaging in more thoughtful, educational sanctions grounded in Restorative Justice.

- Students see value in allowing for more correction in problematic behavior through educational Restorative Justice based sanctions.

This is important to consider as Student Conduct Offices develop sanctions that challenge students' decision making process to allow for more positive, community- like behavior that does not result in pushing students out.

