

Helping Students Handle Conflict

Conflict is an inevitable part of life, especially on a college campus. Close quarters, stressful experiences, and a multitude of values make the environment prime for challenge and disagreements. Of course, interacting with a diverse group of people also makes for loads of learning!

It's important for students to remember that conflict itself is neutral. It is the behavior of the individuals experiencing conflict that determines its value. A conflict can impact a person's emotions, thoughts, ability to learn and engage, and behaviors. How one chooses to deal with a conflict will directly determine the result. Dealing with conflicts in an unhealthy manner weakens relationships and makes getting to the "real issue" more difficult. When dealt with in a positive manner, however, conflict serves as a unique opportunity for growth, understanding, and the strengthening of relationships.



When Mediation is Necessary

Sometimes, a conflict is too difficult for the parties involved to solve themselves. Emotions and irrationality can run high, especially in a roommate situation or a conflict among students living on the same residence hall floor. Home is generally one's escape. For those living on a college campus, their residence hall

is their home away from home. If they are experiencing conflict in that environment, the conflict can become overwhelming.

What is mediation?

Mediation is a flexible, educational process that provides a safe forum for disputing parties to express themselves and resolve differences. During a mediation, a neutral third party facilitates a conversation between disputants. The people involved choose to be there; mediation is a voluntary experience where the disputing parties come to communicate their feelings and negotiate a mutually acceptable resolution.

The person or team serving as the mediating party ensures that each person has equal opportunity to voice perspectives, clarify issues, and explore options for resolution. Mediators do not act as judges and they do not take sides. Their goal is to facilitate, guide, and encourage an exchange where the disputants come to their own conclusions. The mediation process is typically confidential and takes place in a neutral location.

Although many students are hesitant to go through a mediation process at first, the process works. Mediation is successful in almost 90 percent of cases, according to some researchers. When handled well, it's a process full of respect, integrity, and compromise.

Five Tips for Handling Conflict

Whenever possible, students should be encouraged to handle conflict on their own. Here are five tips they can utilize in conflict situations:

1. Know the difference between your principles and your preferences.
2. Review your expectations. Are you being realistic? Is the person capable of changing in the way you desire? Can you adapt to the situation or is it totally unacceptable?
3. Listen! Hear the other person's feelings as well as arguments. Don't interrupt.
4. Accept the right of the other person to a satisfactory solution to the problem. Recognize that this person has legitimate rights that must be respected.
5. State your opinions and feelings frankly but calmly. Be assertive, not aggressive.

Where can my student go for mediation?

On many campuses, Resident Assistants (RA) are trained as mediators. If your student is experiencing a roommate or hallmate-related issue and is comfortable with his RA, encourage him to ask the staff member to conduct a mediation.

If your student is not comfortable with or does not have an RA, there are plenty of other resources available. An Ombudsperson can assist students who are experiencing a conflict with an office, department, or faculty member. Additionally, residence life professionals, counseling centers, a dean of students, or community conflict team can help. There are many people who are here to help your student learn to handle conflict positively and productively.