



# Interpersonal Conflict and Academic Success: A Campus Survey with Practical Applications for Academic Ombuds

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## ABSTRACT

A team of student researchers supervised by a certified organizational ombuds surveyed the interpersonal conflict experiences of 106 undergraduates on a university campus that offers limited ombuds services to students. While a small minority of respondents reported disputes about university policies or disagreements with university personnel, nearly all (90%) reported conflicts with other students within a year of the survey. Intimate relationships (i.e., friends, roommates, and romantic partners) accounted for the majority of the conflicts. While most claimed the conflicts mentioned in the survey did not seriously impact daily life, 70% said the conflicts negatively impacted their academic efforts. About one-third of those who

reported having a conflict said they had sought the assistance of a third party, and 25% of those who did so turned to a faculty member for help in dealing with conflicts with other students. When asked to rate the importance of various qualities of third-party assistance, respondents felt a trained volunteer would most likely facilitate a satisfactory resolution. Despite the small sample size and the limitations of the data collection design, the results suggest a range of practical applications for academic ombuds.

## KEYWORDS

Student conflict, interpersonal conflict, ombuds, academic ombuds, student success



## INTERPERSONAL CONFLICT AND ACADEMIC SUCCESS: A CAMPUS SURVEY WITH PRACTICAL APPLICATIONS FOR ACADEMIC

### INTRODUCTION

Much of the work of the academic ombuds regard listening to and facilitating resolution assistance for visitors dealing with interpersonal conflict. About half of all visits to an ombuds office involve concerns regarding relationships with peers and those charged with the responsibility to evaluate their performance (Katz, Soza, & Kovack, 2018). Moreover, even when issues raised with an ombuds fall into a different category, they often emerge from an initial complaint about interpersonal discord. As a result, on a day-to-day basis, academic ombuds devote much of their time listening to conflict-related concerns, providing one-on-one conflict coaching, serving as third-party mediators, and referring their visitors to appropriate support services (Gadlin, 2000).

Over time trends may surface that connect these interpersonal issues to larger systemic ones. When viewed as a whole, the interpersonal concerns of visitors to an ombuds office may point to the unmet conflict resolution needs of an entire group or community. They may also highlight common practices or policies that precipitate or aggravate the interpersonal dispute. Finally, they can signify a hostile environment, a toxic subculture, and the inappropriate actions of one individual or a group of bad actors. When trends such as these emerge, ombuds are often the first to identify connections between interpersonal discord and organizational dysfunction (Wagner, 1998; Rowe, 1991). Through their formal annual reports and informal conversations, academic ombuds assist leadership in developing expectations and prioritizing services for conflict resolution (Schneck & Zinsser, 2014; Katz, Sosa, & Kovak, 2018).

Key to identifying and describing trending concerns is the effective utilization of data (Barkat, 2015), and visitor tracking data (VTD) is most commonly used for that purpose. Careful deployment of VTD can provide compelling descriptions of trends from the visitor's point of view. However, the generalizability of VTD is quite limited. Such data cannot, for example, speak to the concerns of constituents who have not yet visited an ombuds office, or how the experiences of those who seek ombuds assistance compare with those who do not. Survey data are ideal for addressing the question of prevalence, but few ombuds programs have the expertise or resources to design and implement survey projects. Because many ombuds are solo practitioners without research budgets, they rely upon the research findings of others (Rowe & Bloch, 2012).

Historically, research within and for the ombuds community has tended to be qualitative, in the form of historical analyses (e.g., Claussen, 2013), in-depth interview (e.g., Levine-Finely & Carter, 2010), or ethnographic field studies (e.g., Emerson, 2008; Harrison & Morrill, 2004). While qualitative research projects like these have advanced theoretical understandings, their ability to establish the prevalence of practices, needs or experiences are limited. In contrast, survey data can provide snapshots of concerns in the aggregate, identify the needs and experiences of those who have not yet visited an ombuds office. Such survey results can be deployed to improve outreach to underserved constituent groups, inform prevention training programming, and suggest effective intervention strategies.

The preponderance of ombuds scholarship about conflict has been from a practitioners' point of view. Less has been written from the standpoint of those who visit the offices of those practitioners. Our understanding of the experiences and expectations of actual and potential visitors to an ombuds office is largely anecdotal, and analyses are often limited to internal tracking data. The project described in this article seeks to address this gap by posing a series of questions focused on the needs of student constituents — specifically, their experiences of interpersonal conflict and efforts to resolve them. How many disputes or disagreements does the

average student experience in an academic year? When conflict arises, how much does it impact their daily lives and academic performance? Who, or what offices do students turn to when they seek help in resolving their disputes or disagreements? Finally, when students seek help with interpersonal conflicts, what characteristics of third-party assistance do they prefer?

The following pages pursue these questions by reporting key findings from a campus-wide survey of undergraduates attending a university where conflict resolution services are abundant and diverse, but access to the campus's ombuds program is limited<sup>1</sup>. The subsequent report is presented in four sections. The next section describes the project's origins, the focus of its inquiry, and how a team of student researchers worked together to realize it. Section two reviews the relevant literature to provide a rationale for the study's methodology and describes how the data were collected and analyzed. The third section presents the key findings, and the final section discusses the survey's limitations and practical applications for academic ombuds.

## PROJECT ORIGIN

The idea for this project was born in a special topics course for criminology, and criminal justice majors called CCJ 480: Alternative Dispute Resolution (CCJ 480-ADR). The first author designed the course after serving a three-year term in the dual role of faculty member and coordinator of the university's Faculty Ombuds Program where faculty brought to the office a wide range of concerns, teachers and advisors commonly asked for assistance in dealing with conflicts they had with students, as well as conflicts between their students. In many cases, the students involved visited the FOP upon invitation and either participated in mediation or were referred to another office or program that offered conflict resolution services specifically for students. Inspired by the experience, the first author developed the course as a means to help students hone their conflict management skills.

The students enrolled in CCJ 480-ADR bring to the course a vibrant and diverse stock of common knowledge informed by their direct and highly personal experience of conflict. The course addresses and challenges their knowledge by exposing them to scholarly theories and research about it. Over the years, about 500 CCJ majors have completed nine sections of CCJ 480-ADR. Students appreciate how the course material resonates with the challenges they face in everyday life. In particular, they find immediate application concerning their struggles to understand and deal with the stress of interpersonal conflict with other students. Consequently, course assignments involve connecting the macro (universal principles about conflict and resolution) to the micro (the particularities of lived experiences of roommate troubles, dating discord, and disagreements between a team and club members). For many, this approach catalyzes personal, academic and professional growth in the management of interpersonal conflict.

Each semester CCJ 480-ADR students work in teams to complete term projects that showcase their expertise on an issue or topic relevant to the course. Designed to meet the university's requirements for the liberal studies capstone experience, many of these term projects become significant service learning initiatives. CCJ 480-ADR students have, for example, served the campus community by conducting conflict management workshops for students living in resident halls, Greek life council members, student executive council members, peer mentors, and athletes. On Valentine's Day, teams have provided 'pop up' street clinics to help those in romantic relationships resolve conflicts with their loved ones. Projects like these help fill in the gaps of the university's conflict resolution services system.

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<sup>1</sup> Due to budgetary constraints, in 2007 the University Ombuds Office charter was discontinued and in 2009 a Faculty Ombuds Program was established.



In 2014, a team of five graduating CCJ majors led by the third author decided to serve the campus by surveying the experiences of students about the types, amount and consequences of interpersonal conflict among undergraduates. In brainstorming the survey's focus, the team drew upon their own life experiences to posit that interpersonal conflict between students is a common experience that significantly impacts the quality of daily life and academic performance. Reflecting on the re-occurring themes of class discussions, the team felt that because conflicts with university personnel more often become newsworthy (Astor, 2018; Carroll, 2003; Lembo, 2016; Taylor & Sandeman, 2016), the significance of interpersonal conflicts between students is too often underappreciated or overlooked altogether.

The team began their investigation by defining key terms. Drawing upon assigned readings, the team defined conflict as broadly as possible to include disputes, disagreements or differences of opinions between individuals that often, but do not always, create a sense of discord, disquiet or stress (Willett, 1998). Interpersonal conflicts were defined as those occurring between peers and in the context of relationships that involved regular or ongoing personal interaction (i.e., friends, loved ones, teammates and roommates).

From here, the team turned their attention to operationalizing the concept of academic success. Based on a review of the mission and purpose statements for a variety of student success programs, the team defined academic success as the achievement of personal, social and career development arrived at through academic engagement. While benchmarks of student success vary across programs, the two most commonly used are the successful completion of a course and the timely progression to graduation (see, for example, North Dakota State's Student Success Collaborative at <https://www.ndsu.edu/enrollmentmanagement/studentsuccess>). In order to support the achievement of these larger goals, student success centers provide resources to achieve behaviors like regular class attendance, effective study and note-taking, timely submission of work, and classroom activity engagement (a good example is Pittsburgh State's Student Success Program at <https://www.pittstate.edu/office/student-success-programs/academic-success-workshops.html>).

With these definitions in hand, the team searched the scholarly literature for relevant research. While they discovered numerous research reports regarding conflicts between students and their teachers and advisors, this phase of the project revealed a gap in the literature regarding conflicts between students and the impact of those conflicts on academic success.

## **RELEVANT RESEARCH AND RESEARCH DESIGN**

The team began their review of published research with studies of student-student conflict at the college level. They found that a majority of the articles focus on conflict that occurs within the context of evaluative relationships – i.e., a conflict between students and those with authority to evaluate their academic success (teachers, internship supervisors, or graduate advisors). Of those, the results of one study suggest that family and friends can play a positive role in the management of conflict with those who evaluate academic success. A survey of 55 international graduate students and 53 faculty supervisors reported that advisors were more likely than students to feel conflicts had been successfully resolved. Interestingly, 73% of the students surveyed said they would talk with a family or a friend before talking with their advisor, department head or dean of student life (Adrian-Taylor, Noels, & Tischler, 2007). A similar survey of 153 graduate students found that instructors and advisors who appeared to be competent conflict managers were more likely to be trusted to assist in conflict intervention or management (Punyanunt-Carter & Wrench, 2008). A third study found that more than half of the participants said the conflict between students and their preceptors was frequent, and 46% said such conflict



impeded academic growth (Manchur & Mayrick, 2003). Finally, an assessment of conflict management training for graduate teaching assistants found the conflict management styles of their supervisors was related to their success (Brockman, Nunez, & Basu, 2010).

The team also found a few reports focused exclusively on the interpersonal conflicts of students. In a 2010 survey of 3,844 students from 9 institutions of higher education, for example, 29.2% of the respondents visited campus clinics for help in dealing with interpersonal conflicts and ranked the problem of conflict second only to mood difficulties (Krumrie, Newton, & Kim, 2010). Furthermore, the survey found that interpersonal conflict problems were often embedded in reports of mood regulation, eating disorders, performance anxiety, and life satisfaction.

Although not a study of conflict per se, a study measuring the impact of stress on student success reported that more than half of the 100 undergraduates who participated in a survey claimed conflicts with roommates (61%) and conflicts with romantic partners (57%) were stressful (Ross, Niebling, & Heckert, 1999). Another survey of 140 female undergraduates found a statistically significant correlation between conflict and mood regulation (Creasey, Kershaw, & Boston, 1999). In that study, those with secure relationships with friends and romantic partners were less likely to report negative conflict management experiences, and those with negative conflict management experiences were more likely to struggle with mood regulation. In 2010, DiPaola and colleagues surveyed the experiences of 208 undergraduates regarding a variety of relational categories and found that the closeness of the relationship was positively related to the intensity of the interpersonal conflict. The emotional impact of conflicts with friends, roommates and loved ones, for example, were more intense than those with strangers (DiPaola, 2010).

A few studies reported on the consequences when interpersonal conflict is ill-managed or allowed to escalate. In 2013, for example, McDonald and Asher (2013) analyzed the responses of 157 college students to a series of interpersonal conflict vignettes and found that emotional intensity correlated with revenge as a conflict resolution strategy and that students were more likely to endorse hostile goals with romantic partners than with friends or roommates. Similarly, a qualitative analysis of 153 student accounts of roommate troubles found that) in the early stages of discord students go along to get along, but as roommate troubles escalate, students increasingly embrace antagonistic strategies (Emerson, 2008 & 2011). Finally, in a more recent survey of 1811 high school seniors, Courtain and Glowacz (2018) found students capable of perspective-taking were more likely to choose conflict resolution strategies that would improve the relationship, while students prone to impulsivity were more likely to adopt conflict management strategies likely to damage the relationship.

When viewed together, the results of these studies suggest that peer conflict (i.e., disputes and disagreements with another student) can have as significant an impact on the college experience as evaluative conflict (i.e., disputes and disagreements with teachers, advisors, coaches, mentors and other campus authorities responsible for assessing academic success). The review further suggests that not all peer relationships are the same and differences among them can color the character of the conflict and therefore the impact it has on life satisfaction and academic performance. Specifically, the amount of intimacy or closeness in the relationship could be a significant factor in how students experience conflicts with each other. Inspired by their own experiences, and informed by the relevant literature, the team posed the following research questions for further investigation:

- How prevalent is peer conflict among college and university students?
- How does the prevalence of conflicts between students compare with conflicts students have with university personnel?
- What is the impact of conflict on efforts to achieve academic success?



- What role does intimacy play in the conflict experience?
- Whom do students turn to when they seek help in resolving their interpersonal conflict?
- What characteristics of a third party intervention do students associate with resolution satisfaction?

At this point, the team drafted a series of forced choice questions designed to describe the prevalence of interpersonal conflicts among undergraduates, the perceived impact of those conflicts have on daily life and academic success, and to identify the types of personnel that undergraduates seek help from, as well as the types of conflict intervention they prefer. Because the research literature review did not uncover replicable questionnaire items, the team designed, pre-tested and revised an original 27-item questionnaire (see Appendix). The items are organized by four key concepts: 1. Demographics, 2. Conflict with University Personnel, 3. Conflict with Other Students, and 4. Dispute Resolution Assistance. Serving as a validity hedge, the 27<sup>th</sup> item on the questionnaire was open-ended, inviting respondents to share any additional information of their choosing.

Once exemption from IRB review was obtained, the team deployed a non-probability sampling approach that combined the techniques of geographic cluster sampling and quota sampling (Kalton, 1983). Seven high traffic areas on campus were identified (i.e., classroom buildings, libraries, computer commons, union, parking lots, shuttle bus stations, etc.) and a team member was assigned to each station. For one morning or afternoon during a week in April 2014, each team member randomly selected potential participants from those who passed by. The final sample of 106 undergraduates was large enough and diverse enough to support statistical analyses of the resulting responses.

## KEY FINDINGS

At the conclusion of the data collection phase, a group of research interns led by the second author joined the team. Using the Statistical Package for The Social Sciences (SPSS), they completed data entry, ran the statistics and created graphical displays for course credit.

### *DEMOGRAPHICS*

About 58% of the 106 respondents were female, 46% were nonwhite, and 60% were in-state students. According to the National Center for Education Statistics, this profile is typical for undergraduates enrolled in a four-year public university in the U.S. during 2018 (NCES, 2018). Majors from all the colleges at this university were represented, although, when compared to institutional data, the sample's science majors were slightly over-sampled and English majors were slightly under-sampled. The sample was also skewed toward traditionally-aged freshmen and sophomores in that the average age was not quite 20 years old. Sixty-seven percent of the participants lived in residence halls, and 71% of them shared living quarters with at least two other students. When viewed as a whole, these demographics suggest that there were ample opportunities for those who participated in the study to have experienced conflicts with other students in a variety of circumstances and settings.

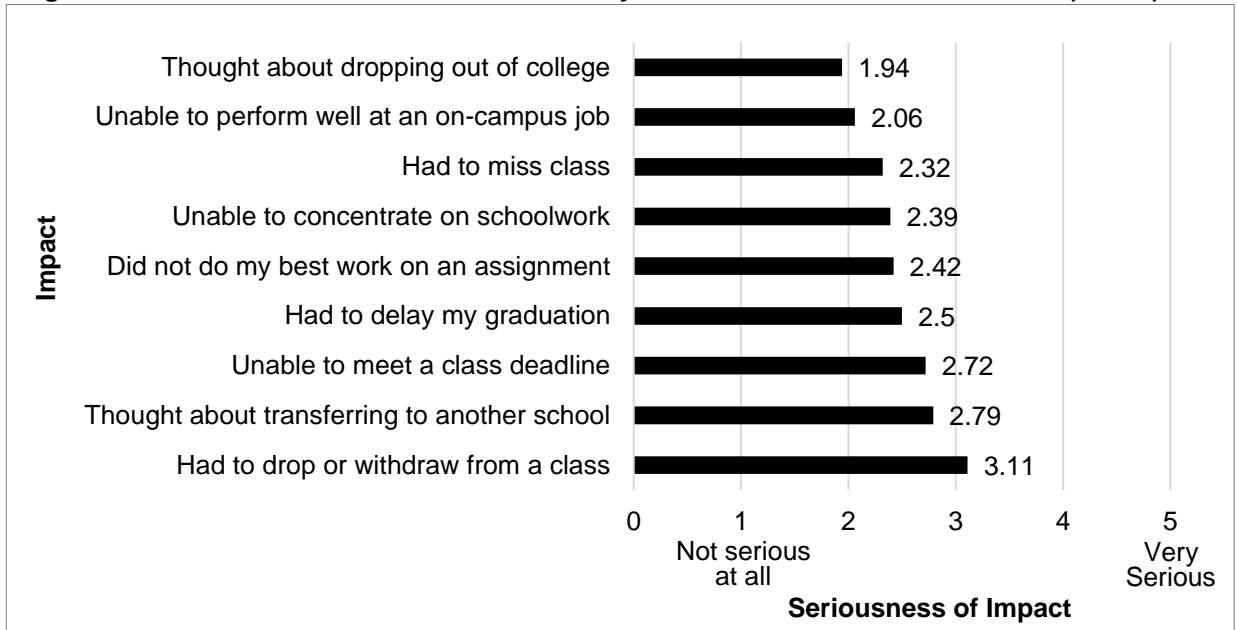
### *CONFLICTS WITH UNIVERSITY PERSONNEL*

The team's review of news media and scholarly literature revealed concern about conflicts between students and university personnel. Consequently, four questionnaire items sought to capture the amount and types of conflict the respondents had with university personnel. Only 17.9% of the 106 respondents said they had ever had a dispute or disagreement about university policy or had ever taken issue with the decisions of a representative of the university. Those 18

respondents were given a list of 41 programs or departments and asked to check all that was relevant. The most common choices were parking services (46%), academic advising (39.3%) and class grades (32.2%). Similarly, they were given a list of six common issues and asked to identify all that applied and the most common answers were similar: parking (52%) and instruction/academic support (30%).

Finally, the 18 students who reported disagreements with university personnel or disputes regarding university policies and practices were given a list of nine potential academic consequences and asked to rate on a five-point scale the seriousness of the impact (Figure 1).

**Figure 1: Seriousness of Conflict with University Personnel on Academic Success (n = 18)**



While the overall average rating of seriousness for all nine consequences was just above 1.43, or “not serious at all,” it is important to note that all 18 respondents indicated that, as a result of their conflict with university personnel, they had to drop or withdraw from a class and 16 of them claimed their graduations were delayed.

#### *CONFLICTS WITH OTHER STUDENTS*

In contrast to conflicts involving university personnel, conflicts with other students were common. Of the 106 students who completed the questionnaire, 90% (n = 96) said they had experienced at least one conflict with another student within a year of their participation in the survey. These 96 respondents reported a total of 848 disputes or disagreements with other students, averaging 8.5 disputes per respondent. Approximately one third (32%) of the respondents generated about half (53%) of these reported conflicts; thus, for these 33 students, interpersonal conflict may be a common feature of college life. When asked to estimate the number of conflicts experienced within the last year, one respondent wrote “a million,” and another wrote, “too many to count.” In the open comment section of the survey, a freshman further elaborated: “fights with my roommate [happen] every single day.” Moreover, a rising senior explained: “[in every class] there’s always one group member who wants to make the rest of us miserable.”

Because the review of published research indicated that the amount of intimacy is a factor affecting a student’s conflict experience, the team took a closer look at the distribution of reported

conflicts across a continuum of intimacy defined by seven types of relationships. At the low end of the continuum are strangers, toward the middle are relationships with acquaintances – i.e., teammates and classmates, and at the high end are relationships with friends, roommates, and romantic partners. Figure 2 displays two distributions across the continuum. The first distribution is the number of *respondents* who reported a disagreement or dispute with another student for seven categories (labeled as "Relationship Type"). The second distribution is *the number of disagreements or disputes* those respondents reported (labeled as "Conflicts"). So, for example, within one year of the survey, 71 respondents reported a total of 258 conflicts with a student who was considered a friend.

**Figure 2: Conflicts with Other Students**

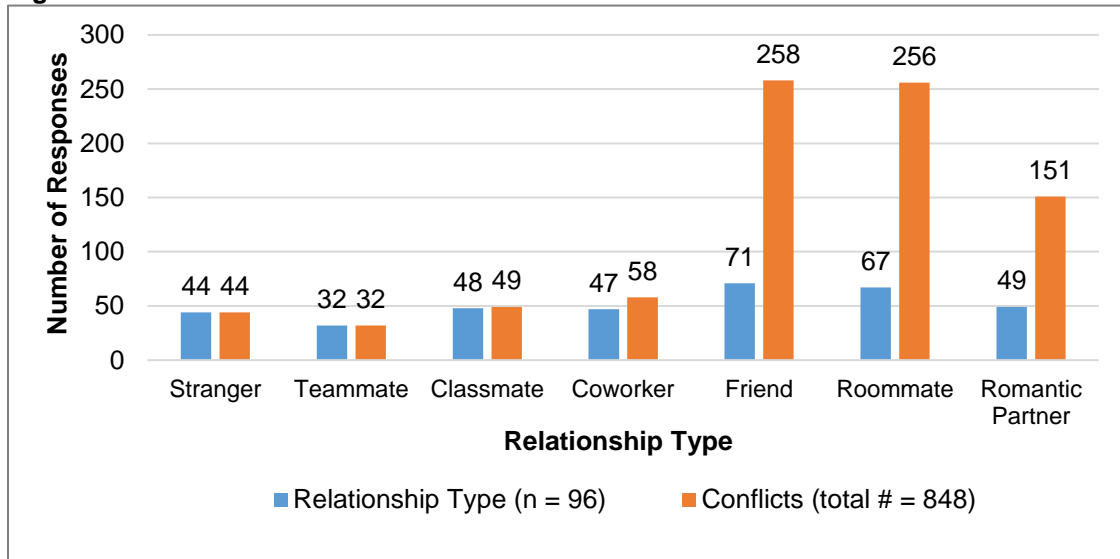


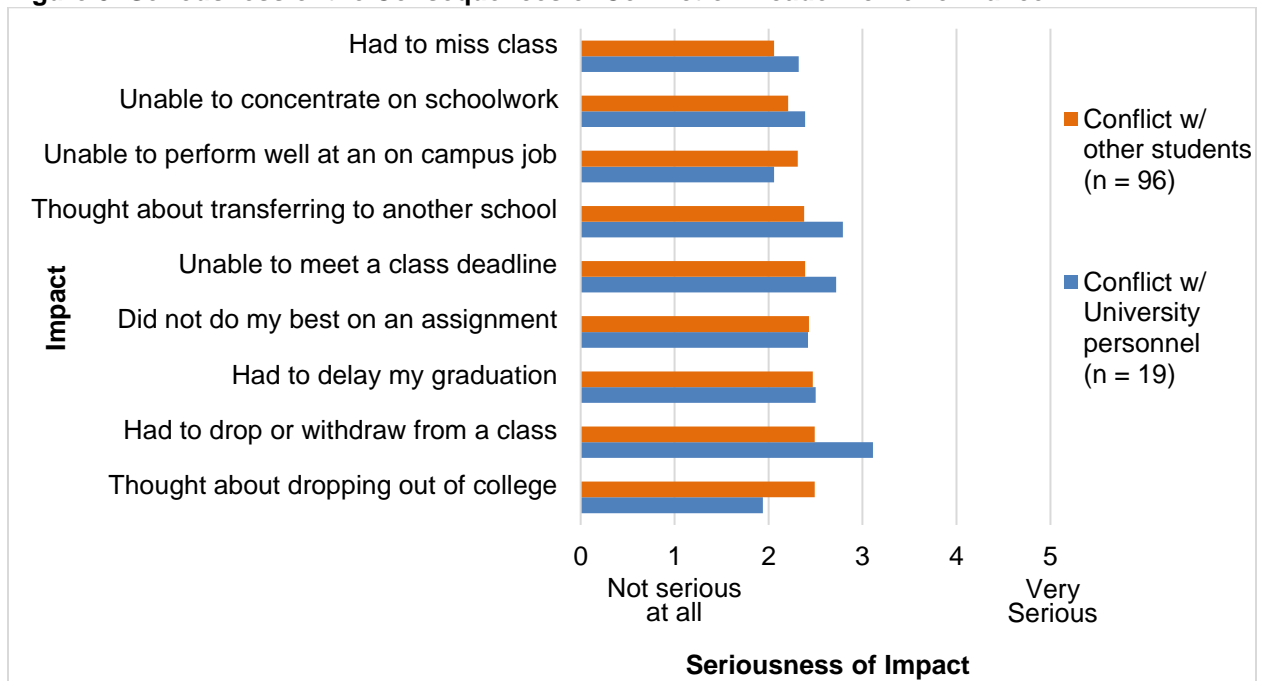
Figure 2 shows that the preponderance (78%) of the 848 student-to-student conflicts occurred at the high end of the intimacy continuum – i.e., friends, roommates or romantic partners (this category includes boyfriends, girlfriends and spouses). In contrast, just 22% of the 848 conflicts involved acquaintances (i.e., teammates, classmates, and co-workers, for example) and strangers. Interestingly, a sizable minority (33%) of these 96 respondents reported conflicts across the entire continuum. i.e., all seven relationship categories. For these students, conflict may be an endemic feature of everyday social interaction.

In light of the literature review, the survey included items that could assess the impact of conflicts across the intimacy continuum. Thus, those who reported disputes or disagreements with other students were then asked to rate on a five-point scale the seriousness of the impact of their conflicts on daily life by each of the seven types of relationships. Overall, the average impact on daily life was only 1.83. Thus, on a daily basis, in the words of one respondent, disputes or disagreements with other students were “no big deal.” In fact, in their open comments, a few respondents said they felt the conflict in a close relationship was normal or even healthy. One female respondent, for example, said an “occasional clearing of the air makes us [roommates] get along better.”

Respondents who had experienced one or more conflicts with another student within a year of the survey were asked to rate the seriousness of the impact of those conflicts on the same list of nine *academic consequences* that were provided to those who reported conflicts with academic personnel. Figure 3 compares two distributions: (1) the average ratings of the seriousness of impact of student conflicts and (2) the average ratings of the seriousness of conflicts with university personnel.



**Figure 3: Seriousness of the Consequences of Conflict on Academic Performance**

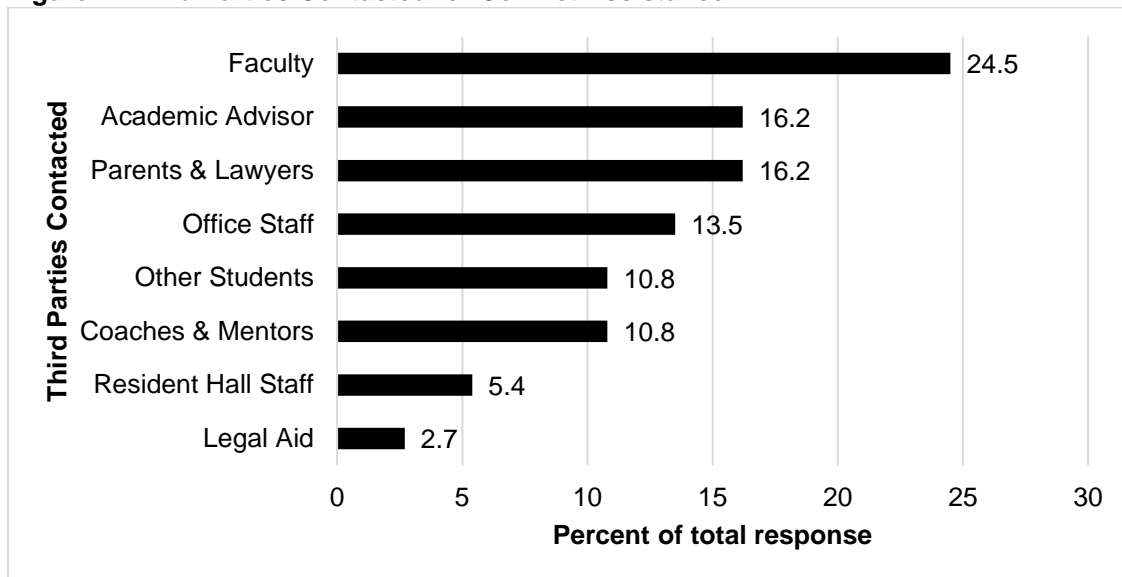


About the academic consequences of conflicts of other students, the range of average ratings for each category was 2.04 -2.43, or somewhere between “serious” and “somewhat serious.” The highest ratings were “did not do my best work” (2.43), “unable to meet a class deadline” (2.39) and “unable to concentrate on schoolwork” (2.21). While the most serious consequence of a conflict with university personnel was “had to drop or withdraw from a class,” the most serious consequence of conflict with another student was “thinking about dropping out of college.” In the open comments, a respondent explained that “bullying by teammates” had caused him/her to consider “forfeiting an athletic scholarship” and transferring to another university.

**DISPUTE RESOLUTION ASSISTANCE**

The team’s review of the research revealed a gap in the literature concerning resolution assistance seeking. For this reason, the final section of the questionnaire included eight items designed to gather information about the respondents’ efforts at seeking assistance in resolving their interpersonal conflicts with students, as well as their perceptions of differing models of conflict intervention. Those who had reported experiencing disputes or disagreements with *anyone* associated with the university (i.e. university personnel or other students) were given a list of 20 potential third parties that included a variety of university representatives (for example, instructors, counselors and student life representatives) as well as personal contacts (i.e., students, parents, and lawyers) and asked to indicate if they had contacted any of them for assistance. Of the 106 who completed the survey, only 37 said they had asked for help from any university representative. Only eight of the 20 types of university representatives were selected. Figure 4 displays the percentage of responses for each of the eight categories.

**Figure 4: Third Parties Contacted for Conflict Assistance**



Given the number of roommate disputes reported in this survey, it is surprising that less than 9% of the respondents sought help from a resident hall staff member. Equally surprising is the fact that the number of contacts with academic personnel (i.e., faculty members and academic advisors) exceeds that of non-academic personnel (resident hall staff, coaches, legal aid, other students, parents, and personal lawyers). About a fourth (24.5%) of the 37 respondents who answered this question contacted faculty members, and 16.2% asked their academic advisors to help them find a resolution. In the open comments, one freshman explained that an instructor’s insensitivity to his/her plight in dealing with an abusive boyfriend increased his/her stress. The respondent explained “[my] teachers didn’t want to hear it and didn’t care.” In contrast, an upperclassman was “forever grateful” that his/her professor provided the opportunity to make up an exam missed due to a late night argument with a boyfriend.

The next set of questions sought information about the perceived outcomes of respondents’ efforts in resolving conflicts with either university personnel or with other students. When asked if their most recent disagreement or dispute had been resolved, only 25% said yes. The rest indicated they were either still in conflict (45.8%), a resolution was in progress (12.5%), or unsure if the conflict had been resolved (17%). Respondents who had sought help from university personnel were then asked to rate on a five-point scale their satisfaction with three elements: the process, outcome, and effort. Even though 48 respondents reported contacting university personnel for conflict resolution assistance, only 20 respondents choose to rate these items. With one meaning “not satisfied at all” and five meaning “completely satisfied,” the overall average rating for was 2.25 or “satisfied.” In an open comment, one student expressed dissatisfaction with the efforts of a peer TA’s attempts to facilitate resolution of group project conflict and two other respondents described the interventions of resident life hall workers (student workers) as “lame” and “bad.”

While most college and university campuses provide students with third-party conflict resolution assistance, there is significant diversity in the types of models that are deployed. The academic ombuds model, for example, emphasizes neutrality. Those without an ombuds office may rely upon university personnel who have received advanced training in mediation, advocacy, or conflict coaching. Finally, some campuses may operate peer volunteer mediation programs. Missing in the literature reviewed were efforts to assess students’ resolution assistance preferences. To that end, the questionnaire included three questions that sought to learn more

about preferences students might have when seeking a third party to facilitate conflict resolution. The team identified three qualities of a third party – neutrality, professionalism, and voluntariness – could impact a student’s satisfaction with the resolution process or outcome. Neutrality was operationalized as “someone who does not decide right or wrong, but who works to make sure the process and outcome is fair for all parties.” Professionalism was characterized as “someone with special education or training in the facilitation of conflict resolution.” The third, “voluntariness,” was defined as “a peer who draws upon personal experience and some training to help facilitate a fair resolution.”

All respondents (regardless of whether or not they had experienced conflict within a year of the study) were asked to reflect on their most recent dispute or disagreement and rate the importance of each characteristic for achieving a satisfactory resolution. Respondents rated the importance of each characteristic on a scale of one to five, with one being “not very important at all” and five being “very important.” While all three characteristics were deemed important for a satisfactory resolution, the help of a trained volunteer was rated as slightly more important (4.0) than the presence of either a neutral party (3.63) or professional resolution facilitation (3.58).

## DISCUSSION

While interest in the empirical study of student conflict has grown in recent years, the focus of attention has been on conflicts in the context of evaluative relationships (i.e., teachers and advisors). Similarly, a cursory review of recent news media suggests conflicts with university personnel seem to be more newsworthy than conflicts between students (see for example Carroll, 2003; Lembo, 2016; Taylor & Sandeman, 2016). And empirical studies of student-student conflict has been predominately qualitative and limited to conflicts between roommates. Drawing upon their direct experiences as college students, the team that pursued this project saw a gap in the literature and endeavored to address it. What they were able to discover supports the widespread view interpersonal conflict can affect the quality of a student’s social life. However, the project goes further to suggest that interpersonal conflict may impact academic success. When viewed together these insights suggest assisting students in managing and resolving their interpersonal conflicts is neither a student support issue nor an academic issue. It is both. As such, effective conflict management and resolution services should be prioritized accordingly.

Thus, to maximize their effectiveness, those who assist students on the “support side of the house” (i.e., resident life staff, diversity and disability advisors, clinicians, etc) need to assess and then take into consideration the extent to which everyday conflicts over seemingly inconsequential issues like food, cleanliness, money owed and parking can impact academic performance. Similarly, those who labor on the “academic side of the house” (faculty, mentors, tutors and academic advisors) would do well to remember that as “first responders,” they are often the first to see the effects of interpersonal conflict on academic performances (Kafka, 2018).

Academic ombuds practitioners are uniquely positioned to facilitate collaborations between student support and academic personnel and help them assess their shared need to provide effective conflict assistance and coordinate the efforts of all those who touch the social lives and academic endeavors of college students. As conflict resolution experts, academic ombuds practitioners can play leading roles in brainstorming and implementing effective conflict management and conflict resolution protocols. This report points to a range of possible preliminary actions. Before discussing those first steps, it is important to knowledge the limitations imposed by the inevitable challenges that characterize student research.

While the demographics of the final sample were similar to those of the institution and national population, the extent to which it represents those populations is incalculable (Kalton, 1983).



Therefore, while suggestive, the results are not conclusive. Future replications could, however, explore the extent to which the findings can be generalized to other campuses. Furthermore, the small size of the final sample resulted in comparison groups too small to meet the assumptions necessary for confidence in statistical tests of differences between answers to multiple questions (Henkel, 1976). Relatedly, although the five-point barometric scales that were used do meet the assumptions for valid associative models, insufficient variation did not meet the muster for regression modeling (Fox, 1991). As a result, the ability to predict the extent to which interpersonal conflicts or the amount of intimacy of those conflicts could impact either academic success, or preferences for conflict resolution was beyond the scope of this study. Despite these limitations, the descriptive statistics reported in this article do provide some insights for academic ombuds work.

While the charters of academic ombuds programs vary considerably from one campus to another, there are opportunities to apply elements of this project to support the efforts of academic ombuds practitioners. On a daily basis student ombuds spend much of the day listening to concerns, investigating the facts, identifying the issues and brainstorming strategies for resolving them. For those who work directly with students, the key findings of this survey could inform the development of a series of questions that could support a deeper reflection regarding program goals and best practices. For example, this survey found that a small group of students appeared to be conflict 'magnets.' If visitor data show similar trends, the ability to identify these types of students early and assess to what extent their magnetism is due to circumstance or conflict style could lead to more efficient and effective interventions. Doing so could reduce the number of 'frequent flyers' and perhaps relieve the conflict intervention loads of the other programs across the campus that are working with the same high conflict students.

Similarly, the findings revealed a number of 'hot spots' where the number of student conflicts was particularly high. This insight might lead to a deeper consideration of how visitor tracking data could be collected or organized to identify high traffic areas. While the findings could spark conversation, direct application of the instrument used to collect the data could capture trends that visitor tracking forms are unable to capture. A campus-wide survey using the CCJ 480-ADR questionnaire could be deployed to determine the extent to which students are effectively utilizing an ombuds program. If, for example, the survey trends are dramatically different from visitor trends, an ombuds program might need to reassess their outreach initiatives or take a closer look at the menu of conflict resolution services provided to students.

While the thought of launching a campus-wide survey could seem overwhelming, the CCJ 480-ADR initiative offers a glimpse into the power of student research. By sponsoring a team of supervised student researchers (by, for example, supporting service learning class projects, thesis research, or field research internships) an academic ombuds office can obtain social science data that could fill in the gaps left by visitor tracking data; thus, taking program assessment and budget justification processes to the next level of sophistication. Such participation could also raise a program's campus profile and add value by directly contributing to their institution's teaching and research missions.

The findings in this report suggest a possible connection between student conflict and academic success. In the past institutions have placed the management of student conflict issues in the student life or student support 'silos.' As a result, the preponderance of resources and training for conflict resolution was dealt to personnel in those silos. While academic personnel like faculty and advisors receive support for classroom management, training for helping students with their interpersonal conflicts has not been a high priority. Yet, most of the students in this study contacted teachers and advisors for help. This suggests that faculty and mentors may serve as 'first responders' when students feel overwhelmed by the conflicts they have with other students. Academic ombuds practitioners are uniquely positioned to raise awareness about the role that



academic personnel can play in helping their students. For starters, ombuds practitioners can prioritize specialized training in effective interpersonal conflict intervention for new faculty, and academic advisor hires. Further, they can facilitate conversation across and collaboration between the “support” and “academic” silos. Sharing the findings from the survey reported in this study, or the results of its replication could be the first step toward supporting a more integrated approach to the management of student interpersonal conflicts.

Finally, the students who participated in this survey noted that interpersonal conflicts had negatively impacted their academic efforts. The recent rise of a Student Success Movement has provoked a significant rethinking of what constitutes success, the factors that undermine and facilitate it, and what institutions can do to support it (Konrad, 2018). As a result, many colleges and universities are making student success programming a high priority. Such programs provide a diverse menu of services that attend to the mental, social and intellectual needs of students. The experiences reported in this study suggests that conflict resolution services could bolster the efforts of Student Success Centers and Programs. A partnership between academic ombuds offices and their institutions' student success initiatives might be worth considering. By pooling resources, such a partnership could support the establishment of a peer mediation program or the development of a noncredit interpersonal conflict management class or training series geared toward the specific needs of students.

## **CONCLUSION**

In just one semester and with minimal resources, a team of students designed and implemented a survey of undergraduate conflict experiences. Inspired by their personal experiences and a sense that the research to date has not adequately addressed those experiences, they designed an original questionnaire. While the generalizability of the findings is limited by the practical constraints of the project, they provide insights for future investigation and practical application. When viewed as a whole, the results suggest that interpersonal conflict is a ubiquitous experience for college students and that most of them are, most of the time, successfully managing them. However, some students, either due to circumstance or to their conflict management styles, have an uncommon amount of conflict in their lives or struggle with conflicts that have negatively colored their college experience. As experts in conflict management and dispute resolution, academic ombuds are uniquely positioned to raise awareness about and meaningfully address the interpersonal conflict concerns of college and university students. This article has aspired to provide academic ombuds with ideas and resources to address the conflict needs of their students.



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## APPENDIX

### CAMPUS SURVEY: UNDERGRADUATE DISPUTE EXPERIENCES

Thank you for taking the time to participate in this questionnaire. The purpose of this survey is to assess the current dispute resolution of students. Your answers are anonymous and will not be associated with your identity. Your participation is voluntary and you may choose to quit at any time without consequences. You **must be at least 18 years** of age and an **enrolled at this university**. Completing this questionnaire signifies your agreement to participate in this survey. This questionnaire was created by CCJ undergraduate to fulfill course requirements. If you have questions or concerns regarding this survey please contact the instructor at XXX-XXX-XXXX. For any questions or concerns regarding your rights as a research participant, contact the Human Research Protection Office at XXX\_XXX\_XXXX.

#### I. DEMOGRAPHICS

For the next three questions, fill in the blank.

- Q1. \_\_\_\_\_ How many semesters have you taken classes at NAU?  
Q2. \_\_\_\_\_ How many people do you share a living space with?  
Q3. \_\_\_\_\_ What is your age?

For the next seven items, check the box that best fits your answer.

Q4. What is your sex?

1.  Male    2.  Female

Q5. In which college is your major?

- |  |  |
|--|--|
| 1. <input type="checkbox"/> Arts & Letters                   | 6. <input type="checkbox"/> Social & Behavioral Sciences |
| 2. <input type="checkbox"/> Education                        | 7. <input type="checkbox"/> Graduate College             |
| 3. <input type="checkbox"/> Engineering/Forestry/N. Sciences | 8. <input type="checkbox"/> Business                     |
| 4. <input type="checkbox"/> Health and Human Services        | 9. <input type="checkbox"/> University College           |
| 5. <input type="checkbox"/> Education                        | 10. <input type="checkbox"/> Extended Campuses           |

Q6. Do you live on or off campus?

1.  On-campus    2.  Off-campus

Q7. What best describes your residency status:

1.  In-state resident  
2.  Out-of-state resident  
3.  International

Q8. Are you a transfer student?

1.  Yes    2.  No



Q9. On which campus do you take most of your classes?

- 1.  Community College Campuses
- 2.  Main Campus
- 3.  An Extended Campus (online or statewide campus)

Q10. What ethnicity do you classify yourself as?

- 1.  Native American
- 2.  Asian American
- 3.  African American
- 4.  Hispanic American
- 5.  International
- 6.  White
- 7.  Mixed (Two or more of any category)
- 8.  Unknown

**II. CONFLICTS INVOLVING UNIVERSITY PERSONNEL**

The items in this section focus on your experiences regarding disputes or disagreements about university policies and rules, as well as the decisions and actions of university personnel.

Q11. Have you ever had, or do you currently have, a dispute/disagreement about a university policy or rule?

- 1.  Yes
- 2.  No

Q12. Have you ever had or do you currently have a dispute/disagreement about how university personnel has implemented university policies, rules; or the decisions of a university representative?

- 1.  Yes
- 2.  No

Q13. If you answered “yes” to Q11 or Q12, which of the following are/were relevant? Check all that apply.

- 1.  Your Class grade
- 2.  Academic Advising
- 3.  Admissions
- 4.  Association of Students
- 5.  Athletics
- 6.  BB Learn
- 7.  Bookstore
- 8.  Campus Health Services
- 9.  Theft or Assault
- 10.  Library Services
- 11.  Dining Services
- 12.  Disability Resources
- 13.  Education Abroad
- 14.  Extended Campuses
- 15.  Family Housing
- 16.  Financial Aid
- 17.  Campus Health Service
- 18.  Parking/Shuttle Services
- 19.  Gateway Student Center
- 20.  Tuition Benefits
- 21.  Graduate Admissions
- 22.  Campus Payment Card
- 23.  Campus Maintenance
- 24.  Billing/Payment Services
- 25.  Greek Life
- 26.  Intramural Activities
- 27.  Course Registration Services
- 28.  Meal Plans
- 29.  E-mail Services
- 30.  Office of Parent Services
- 31.  Parking Services
- 32.  Fees or Charges
- 33.  Resident Life
- 34.  Military Benefits
- 35.  Student Life
- 36.  Student Senate
- 37.  Online Access
- 38.  Study Abroad



- 39.  Transfer Credits
- 40.  Parking & Shuttle

- 41.  Tuition Benefits
- 42. Other: \_\_\_\_\_

Q14. If you answered “yes” to Q11 or Q12, which of the following best describes the general nature of your **most recent** dispute/disagreement regarding university policies, rules or the decisions of university personnel? Check all that apply.

- 1.  Financial/Monetary
- 2.  Employment
- 3.  Entitlement to Resources/Support
- 4.  Instruction/Academic Support
- 5.  Lifestyle choices
- 6.  Parking

Q15. If you answered “yes” to Q11 or Q12, think about the most recent dispute or disagreement you have had **university personnel** and the impact it may have had on your **academic success** while enrolled at this university. On a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 = not serious at all, and 5 = very serious, rate the **seriousness of the impact for each type of consequence**. For each item circle the number that best indicates your rating.

1. Unable to concentrate on schoolwork	1	2	3	4	5
2. Had to miss a class	1	2	3	4	5
3. Unable to meet a class deadline	1	2	3	4	5
4. Didn't do my best work on a course assignment	1	2	3	4	5
5. Had to drop or withdraw from a class	1	2	3	4	5
6. Had to delay graduation	1	2	3	4	5
7. Thought about dropping out of college	1	2	3	4	5
8. Thought about transferring to another university	1	2	3	4	5
9. Unable to perform well at on-campus job	1	2	3	4	5

### III. INTERPERSONAL DISPUTES WITH OTHER STUDENTS

The items in this section focus on your disagreements or disputes you have had with **other students** while enrolled at this university.

Q16. Looking back over the **past year, estimate of the number** of disputes or disagreements you have had with the following:

- 1. \_\_\_\_\_ Roommates
- 2. \_\_\_\_\_ Classmates
- 3. \_\_\_\_\_ Friends
- 4. \_\_\_\_\_ Teammates
- 5. \_\_\_\_\_ Boyfriend or Girlfriend
- 6. \_\_\_\_\_ Co-workers
- 7. \_\_\_\_\_ Stranger

Q17. If you have had a dispute or disagreement with **another student** while enrolled at this university, think about how the conflict impacted your **daily life**. On a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 = not serious at all and 5 = very serious, rank the overall **seriousness of the impact on your daily life** for each type of person you have had a disagreement or dispute with. Indicate your rating by circling the number:

1. Roommates	1	2	3	4	5
2. Classmates	1	2	3	4	5
3. Friends	1	2	3	4	5
4. Teammates	1	2	3	4	5
5. Boyfriend, Girlfriend or Spouse	1	2	3	4	5
6. Co-workers	1	2	3	4	5
7. Stranger	1	2	3	4	5



Q18. Below is a list of behaviors that can undermine a student’s effort to graduate in a timely manner. If you have had a dispute or disagreement with **anyone at this university** – i.e., university personnel or other student while enrolled at this university, think about the extent to which the conflict may have caused any of the nine behaviors. On a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 = not serious at all and 5 = very serious, rate the **seriousness of the impact any had on your academic success**. Circle the number that best indicates your rating.

1. Unable to concentrate on schoolwork	1	2	3	4	5
2. Had to miss a class	1	2	3	4	5
3. Unable to meet a class deadline	1	2	3	4	5
4. Didn’t do my best work on a course assignment	1	2	3	4	5
5. Had to drop or withdraw from a class	1	2	3	4	5
6. Had to delay graduation	1	2	3	4	5
7. Thought about dropping out of college	1	2	3	4	5
8. Thought about transferring to another university	1	2	3	4	5
9. Unable to perform well at on-campus job	1	2	3	4	5

#### IV. DISPUTE RESOLUTION ASSISTANCE

While the previous set of questions focused on disputes or disagreements you have had while enrolled at this university, this section focuses on your experience **seeking assistance in resolving them**. Specifically, the following items seek your experiences and opinions regarding the **efforts of authorities** (university personnel, your parents, lawyers or police, for example) to help students resolve their disputes.

Q19. Take a moment to think about your most recent dispute you have had while enrolled at this university. Which of the following did you contact for assistance to finding a resolution? Check all that apply.

1.  Faculty
2.  Teachers Assistant
3.  Lab Assistant
4.  Athletic Coach
5.  Resident Advisor
6.  College Dean
7.  Campus Program Coordinator
8.  Provost
9.  Student Legal Aid
10.  Academic Advisor
11.  Police Officer
12.  Mentor
14.  Office Staff
15.  Office Director
16.  University Vice President
17.  Office Staff
18.  Other Student
19.  Parent
20.  Personal or family lawyer



Q20. In thinking about your **most recent** disagreement or dispute with **anyone associated with the university** (i.e. conflicts with university employees, or with other students), has it been resolved?

- 1.  Yes
- 2.  No
- 3.  Unsure
- 4.  Still In the Process

If you have ever asked **university personnel** to help you resolve a dispute or disagreement, rate their effort(s) on a scale of 1-5 with 1 = not satisfied and 5 = very satisfied. Circle the number that best indicates your rating.

Q21.	Satisfaction with the resolution <i>process</i>	1	2	3	4	5
Q22.	Satisfaction with the <i>end result</i> of your resolution effort	1	2	3	4	5
Q23.	Satisfaction with <i>university personnel's resolution efforts</i>	1	2	3	4	5

For the next three questions, seek your opinion about the different types of conflict resolution models that are commonly found on college and university campuses. Reflecting on the types of disagreements/disputes you have had while enrolled in this university, on a scale of 1-5 rate the **importance** of each quality for a **satisfactory resolution** with 1 = not important at all and 5= very important. Circle the number that best indicates your rating.

Q24.	A <b>neutral party</b> does not decide which side is right or wrong, but works to make sure the process is fair for everyone. How important is it to you that the person helping you find a resolution remains <b>neutral</b> ?	1	2	3	4	5
Q25.	A <b>conflict resolution professional</b> is someone who has obtained a certificate or a degree that allows them to specialize in a conflict resolution practice. How important is it to you that the person helping you find a resolution is a <b>credentialed professional</b> ?	1	2	3	4	5
Q26.	A peer mediator is someone who draws upon their personal experience to help those like them resolve their disputes. Peer mentors are unpaid volunteers who receive some training. How important is it to you that the person helping you find a resolution is <b>another student</b> who has experienced conflicts like yours?	1	2	3	4	5

**V. Open Response**

Q27. Is there more you would like us to know? To protect your anonymity, we ask that you avoid sharing information that might reveal you identity or the identity of anyone else.

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**Thank you for completing this questionnaire.**