

My Professor is So Unfair:

Student Attitudes and Experiences of Conflict with Faculty

Harrison, T. R. (2007). My professor is so unfair: Student attitudes and experiences of conflict with faculty. *Conflict Resolution Quarterly*, 24(3), 349-368.

According to Harrison (2007), university campus “ombuds offices may see between 0.5 and 2 percent of the student population in any year (p. 351).” Historically, student-faculty conflict on university campuses primarily has found social interest through major news media outlets over the pursuit of academic research. This lack of academic interest may be attributed to differing reasons including resolutions to student-faculty conflict being reached through legal recourse and an overarching cultural understanding of the role of ombuds work being primarily in the governmental sector.

Harrison does highlight the trend on university campuses to broaden their conflict resolution programs to encompass an ombuds office for resolving disputes. Motivations include a desire to resolve the conflict internally and reduce litigation costs, while showing organizational concern about the conflict situation.

Asking How, Not Why, Students Seek Conflict Resolution

Harrison argues that although there has been a significant amount of scholarship focused on why students file grievances and/or seek a resolution to the conflict process with a professor, there has been no focus on how they go about filing a grievance and/or seeking a resolution. Further, he concerns himself with students’ awareness of the availability of ombuds services on a university campus.

Research Method and Design

Surveying 308 undergraduate students in a required general education course, Harrison asked what circumstances would provoke a student to pursue a conflict, how they pursue those grievances and to what effect, future grievances, motivations for grievance pursuit, influence of experience with past conflict resolution on desire to pursue future conflicts, conflict experiences of male versus female students, awareness of ombuds presence on campus, and impressions of university systems for conflict resolution.

Approximately 1/3 of students responding indicated previous experience pursuing a grievance with an additional 1/3 indicating that they had felt strongly about a conflict with a professor, but chose not to pursue any action. However, all students indicated that filing a grievance would be of interest to them in situations of conflict.

Conflict in Context

Context plays a significant role in the decision of students to pursue a grievance. Conflict resolution often is bound by specific situations, in terms of the outcomes expected by students:

- Most grievances focused on the academic outcomes and the learning process for students, with the performance of instructors and professors in the classroom, as well as the final indicator of their performance—grades.
- Secondary conflicts are of a more personal nature including grievances about harassment, personality, and bias.
- Context also is important with respect to class size. Students in smaller classes were more likely to experience conflict with professors despite complaints about large classes. This may be attributed to a greater potential for personal interactions with a professor and often is amplified in required courses where students feel they have no alternatives to taking the required course.

Process and Outcome

Overwhelmingly, students chose individuals, such as peers, who have no authority in resolving the conflict situation and serves as an outlet for venting anger or aid in choosing a course of action to take when filing a grievance. The venting process has two potential outcomes: it may be cathartic for students experiencing a conflict and may reduce or remove altogether the conflict for that student, or it may serve to entrench those students in their own position of being wronged.

To Take or Not to Take Action. That is the question.

According to Harrison, “the reasons students gave for not pursuing a conflict might provide insight into the climate of college campuses” (p. 362). Students provided a number of reasons for choosing not to pursue conflict resolution:

- Fears of retribution;
- Fears of damaging relationships with other faculty;
- Concerns about academic standing within major department;
- Beliefs that their professor has too much power;
- Concerns that filing a grievance would produce no positive outcome; or
- Beliefs that the process was too much trouble.

Even when students were not afraid to file grievances, they often failed to do so because of a lack of knowledge about the process. This occurred even when Ombuds offices made significant attempts to inform faculty and students about dispute resolution services.

Overall, these findings about not taking action suggest that students have high perceptions of fear and a sense of pettiness concerning the dispute resolution process. This student reaction appears contradictory to university mission policies of promoting “discovery through discourse” (p. 362). Rather than confronting the issue, students engaged in avoidance practices and continued the relationship with offending faculty until such time as the relationship could be terminated (i.e. the end of the course or the educational interaction).

Past Behaviour is the Best Predictor of Future Behaviour

Intentionality with respect to reporting future grievances offers a more nuanced perspective on student-faculty conflict. Harrison found that students with past experience pursuing grievances were more likely to pursue grievances in the future than those without this experience. These issues included, but were not limited to personality, harassment, questions of competence, exam scheduling conflicts, and perceptions of unfair grading practices.

The caveat to these findings is that past experiences with grievances are not always consistent with future plans for dealing with grievances. Many students reported that they did not file grievances in past encounters when they felt conflict, but that they would do so in the future if they experienced the same issues.

Gender and Conflict

Harrison found that female and male students were equally likely to engage in peer support actions when perceiving conflict with faculty, but that female students were more likely than males to seek out parental support and advice, as well as be concerned about the consequences of confronting an offending faculty member. Additionally, female students perceived harassment as an issue of greater concern and worthy of pursuit.

Student Perceptions of Ombuds Services

Although students had knowledge of the ombuds office, they had limited understanding of services offered. They viewed ombudspersons as mediators, although ombuds offices offer additional services. Consequently, this limited understanding of ombuds services may have prevented students from considering the ombuds office when experiencing conflict.

Implications for the Mediation Field and University Campuses

Conflict on university campuses has many implications. Students experiencing conflict may report poorer evaluations of the university. Further, Harrison links dissatisfaction with universities and perceptions of conflict with employee experiences in the workforce (Morrill, 1995), noting that student attendance, sense of efficacy in school, and engagement in class may decline when conflicts go unresolved.

Strategies that universities can engage include:

- Training professors in conflict management, and
- Increasing visibility of ombuds offices and services

Overall, Harrison’s examination of conflict perceptions by students toward filing grievances and actual actions taken indicates that conflict remains largely hidden on university campuses. Universities “need to be more active establishing trusting environments, creating alternative forums for dispute resolution, and improving student-faculty interaction” (p. 365) in order to be more student-centered institutions.