

CHRIS O'RIORDAN-ADJAH: Welcome to another edition of Let's Talk Ed with Professor Chris. Once again, we're here to help you all experience college and not survive college. Today's edition, we're talking about how not to get into trouble and, just in case, if you were to go to, to get some help. I have with me today Dr. Jonathan [Wirt]. Jon, how are you doing?

JONATHAN WIRT: Hello. Hello, Dr. Chris. Great.

O'RIORDAN-ADJAH: Well, thanks again for, for coming. So, right off the bat, you are, and I should have mentioned this, that you are the dean for Student Life and Student Conduct. When I saw the title, I said, "This is a very busy man because he deals with Student Life and he deals with Student Conduct." Let's start with Student Life first. What is your role as a Student Life dean?

WIRT: Right. Well, thanks for the opportunity. It's so great to be here.

O'RIORDAN-ADJAH: Absolutely.

WIRT: Student Life, basically, is the component of student activities, clubs and student government.

O'RIORDAN-ADJAH: OK.

WIRT: So, that whole area I help guide and direct, and it's a very, like you mentioned, very busy and exciting part of student life, those three areas.

O'RIORDAN-ADJAH: Right. So, you're actually talking about the exciting part about student life when you talk about ...

WIRT: Absolutely.

O'RIORDAN-ADJAH: OK. Now I get it. What about Student Conduct?

WIRT: Yeah, you know, student conduct is a fact of life, right? And, and being at the largest community college, sometimes it's hard to navigate, and life issues get into our way. And there's certain rules and regulations one has to follow to have an environment for success. So, my role is, whenever the school refers a student, or faculty member refers a student, the student comes to meet with me.

O'RIORDAN-ADJAH: Yeah, all right. So, I'm gonna get, we'll get a little more about the student conduct aspect here. But for starters, what is it that you probably don't think students know that you do as a student, as a dean of Student Conduct?

WIRT: Well, the most important thing is that, even though they're referred to me, my role is to be a resource. And I know that sounds cliché, but the bottom line is, is that I'm able to meet a student, we have an issue, but I can help them navigate at the largest community college in North Carolina on a personal level.

O'RIORDAN-ADJAH: Yes.

WIRT: One on one, just like we're having a conversation now. That's how it works.

O'RIORDAN-ADJAH: Perfect. So, because I, when, in a student's mind, and I'm actually kind of in the same boat as the department head, unfortunately now, advising is probably, I do a little bit of advising with students, unfortunately, the only time I get to see my students is when they're in trouble. The faculty says, "Well, here you go again, students cheating." We'll get into cheating here in a second, but I feel like that is not how I want students to view me, or that's not how I want to meet my students. Do you feel the same way that the only time you actually interact with them is when they're in trouble?

WIRT: Yes, but the good news is this.

O'RIORDAN-ADJAH: Yes.

WIRT: And it's probably the same, true for you. I've developed a relationship, so I always say this in my one-on-ones: "No matter how we met, now we know each other, and now we have a relationship. So, now, let's be proactive, and let's move forward."

O'RIORDAN-ADJAH: Can I borrow that?

WIRT: You may take it. It's all yours.

O'RIORDAN-ADJAH: That's great. That's great. So, what are the, you do student life, so you probably have more opportunities to see students than I do. So, what are some of the fun stuff when you talking about student life, clubs, activities? How, how are you involved in that?

WIRT: Well, we have a dynamic Student Activities staff that works in all those three areas. You know, everybody likes free food and fun, right? So, the Student Activities side of that, we have different events pretty much throughout the year that are standard that help students get engaged. Love working with student leaders to SGA. So, those are some of the top students we have. So, that's exciting. And then the clubs. I mean, we have so many clubs, you could always get connected. So, basically facilitating those clubs to be able to do their own programming, financing them, that type of thing.

O'RIORDAN-ADJAH: Perfect. What trouble are students getting themselves into these days?

WIRT: Life and being a student is, is hard to manage sometimes, right? And we all carry different burdens, and we have to bring them to the classroom. And sometimes those frustrations, those anxieties, can come out, and sometimes they come out in a way that's a behavior that can be a violation of the Code of Conduct. So, when I meet students, they're not bad students. It's just something happened. They got frustrated, and they crossed the line and violated the Code of Conduct. And at that point, then I meet with them.

O'RIORDAN-ADJAH: All right. Is the process the same way, are students, faculty, reporting students to you? How does that process work? Let's say a student is misbehaving in the classroom. Then faculty just reaches out to, I know that they will reach out to me as a department head, and then I have to kind of fill out a form. But do they come directly to you? Faculty?

WIRT: That's a good question. So, what we want to be able to do is report. We need to have a reporting culture because we're so large. We can't say, as a faculty member, "Well, somebody else will, will report a violation or a behavior concern." And there's two distinctions, we can talk about that later, but the bottom line is, is that every employee of the college has access to report, and it's an online form. But when I get the online form, depending on the report, I will follow up with the reporter. The reporter could be a police officer, it could be the librarian, it could be a faculty member. But I will follow up to see, to get further explanation before I meet with the student.

And, by the way, just to let you know, these conduct meetings are confidential. So I, the student knows that they can share in a very candid, confidential way with me.

O'RIORDAN-ADJAH: Great. OK, so let's say a student gets in trouble. Do the students know to come to you?

WIRT: Oh, most of the time, the employee, it's usually a faculty member, will say, "You need to go see the dean." And the, and the faculty even has the, the right to say, "Before we can allow you to come back to the class, you need to see the dean." The reporting triggers some mechanisms in place where I reach out directly to the student to say, "Hey, I got a report. My name is Jonathan Wirt. I'm the dean of Student Conduct. I need to meet with you."

O'RIORDAN-ADJAH: OK.

WIRT: Yeah.

O'RIORDAN-ADJAH: So, so far as the trouble that the students will get themselves into, I'd like to go into cheating. Let's, let's start right from that, because that's kind of one of the ways that I know we usually have students go to Student Conduct.

Last, well COVID hit, and we went, we went virtual with all our classes. And one after the other, we're getting different cases of what cheating. And I actually did a little promo about, about not cheating, and I, for my students, you know, I said, "Guys, this is the challenge you're gonna face if you wanna do engineering." Engineering is kind of what I did actually say, right, when I recorded a promo, and I said, "This is what is asked." Unfortunately, in engineering, and it applies to every field, but more so in engineering, and it could be in medicine if you wanna be a doctor. But you start right now, it will catch up to you, unfortunately, at the wrong time. So, don't, don't start right now to do it. But it got very, very bad, so we had to address it, and that was one way we addressed it. Unfortunately, we still have students, you know, that get caught, and some we, we, we fail them.

We also got a lot of notice from Student Conduct with the process, so I kind of wanna, I want you to walk us through the process very carefully so students know what the process is. So, the faculty reports a student to me. I fill out the form. It comes to you. What, what happens after that?

WIRT: Right. So, keep in mind that the person who witnessed or identified the violation, we're using cheating as an example, is the faculty member. So, the faculty member may share with the department head, but the faculty member would be the ultimate person who would file the report. Before we can contact the student, the, the faculty member has to validate that they had a conversation with the student. In other words, students shouldn't be hearing from me first. The faculty member should say, "Hey, this happened, and I'm reporting you. You should be hearing from the dean."

The other thing to keep in mind is that the faculty member is the one who is assigning the penalty. So, remember, there's two terms: penalty and sanction.

O'RIORDAN-ADJAH: You're not the bad guy.

WIRT: I'm not. Well, not yet. No, I'm not the bad guy. But, but usually there's some penalty for the cheating. So, a zero on the assignment. So, the faculty member is the one giving the penalty. When it comes to me, and I reach out to the student, and I meet with the student, then what happens is we will discuss the incident, and, depending on the frequency, then the student could get a sanction. Sanctions go from a written warning all the way to expulsion.

O'RIORDAN-ADJAH: OK.

WIRT: So, again, penalty given by the faculty member to sanction given by the conduct officer.

O'RIORDAN-ADJAH: Perfect. So, I'm happy you pointed that out. So, it's like first, first attempt, then you get a warning. Is that ...?

WIRT: Well, actually, thanks in a collaboration between Student Conduct and academics, the college has a policy. First time?

O'RIORDAN-ADJAH: Yes.

WIRT: You get a pass first time.

O'RIORDAN-ADJAH: OK.

WIRT: First time, yes. It's called an FIO. It's for information only. What it says is you've got a report, we're documenting it, your faculty member still might give you penalty, but as far as the Office of Student Conduct, you get a pass. No sanction, but we're recording as number one.

O'RIORDAN-ADJAH: OK. All right, so this is where I play the angel's advocate that I call, I don't, I don't want to be a devil's advocate, so I go for angel's advocate for the student. I get caught cheating, first time. Faculty reports it, right? Student Conduct says, "We put a little

check mark there. We're just taking note of that. We're not doing anything on our end." I always encourage students to talk to the faculty first to see if there's anything they can do to help them out. Let's say the student repeats the act, second time, third time. At which point does Student Conduct say, "Sorry, you are out of here"?

WIRT: Right. So, we like to be angel's advocates, too, OK? And remember, we are trying to help the student understand what took place, and we're trying to help them understand the process. So, yes, the first offense, they get a pass. Sometimes we end up talking to the student to explain to them because they're gonna want to, the reality is they may not agree. Their definition of cheating may be different. So, we, my role then, just to let you know another role, is to mediate between the instructor and the student to try to find out an agreeable understanding, OK?

Now, if there's a second incident, then it's usually a warning as a sanction, followed by a probation if it's another, and you can actually, in other words, what we call it, sanction yourself out of the college.

O'RIORDAN-ADJAH: OK.

WIRT: Yes.

O'RIORDAN-ADJAH: So, I'm actually always kind of very interested in the process of the penalty we give to the student. When we, let's say we suspend a student, are we in touch with the student to see how they're doing? Is that a student's responsibility to say, "I'm good. Can I come back now?" What is, what's the process?

WIRT: So, the Student Office of Conduct will provide a sanction that can end up being a suspension. So, our office could provide a sanction of suspension. Suspensions can be a half-year, a full year, a variety. A suspension is from the entire college. So, if you're taking six classes, and you have repetitively cheated in one, you could be suspended and be dismissed from all those classes. It's pretty severe.

O'RIORDAN-ADJAH: Pause.

WIRT: Yes.

O'RIORDAN-ADJAH: Students, don't cheat. Please. I didn't realize this was a long suspension or that that's an excuse for you to, to do that, but this is pretty steep. You miss six classes, we're talking a full semester.

WIRT: Yes. And let me, can I add something, Chris?

O'RIORDAN-ADJAH: Please.

WIRT: This is a very, I'm glad you're conveying this because we want this to be successful to students That suspension doesn't wait till you finish the semester. If that cheating took place the first month, and it's a repeat where it led to a suspension, you are suspended immediately, taking an F in all your classes, losing all your money. And then you don't come back for another year. I needed to add that severity to what you're saying.

O'RIORDAN-ADJAH: I really appreciate it. So, there, there we have it. This is good. I don't, I'm not even sure what else to add to it, but this is very, very serious. If you have this break in your academic life, this is, this is very, very challenging, and unfortunately, sometimes this does not help you come back either.

So, OK, I know we've kinda, we, we dove down a little bit into the deep end here, and I don't want students to think, "Oh, wow, you know, what do I do?" So, let's dial it up a little bit. Let's, let's have some fun. If the student is on, before the student goes on their suspension, again, I don't wish this on any student, but if they do, what are the steps? Is that, this is what you need to be doing if you wanna come back? Is there even a second chance of them coming back from a suspension?

WIRT: Oh, absolutely.

O'RIORDAN-ADJAH: OK.

WIRT: So, if a student is ever gonna be position where they're suspended, they are suspended for a period of time. But they're eligible to come back, which is wonderful, OK? So, they can repeat those classes that they may have gotten a withdrawal in or an F.

Remember, keep in mind, we're being positive here. Conduct conversations and processing is confidential, OK? It's, it's not the end of the world. It's unfortunate that it's come to this, but we can turn it around, OK? By the way, none of this is on a transcript. OK, keep that in mind. The only things on the transcript are grades. OK? All of what we're talking

about is private. And by the way, this electronic processing, not even Dr. [Scott] Ralls, the president, can access it. No faculty member can access it. Only conduct officers.

So, let me explain this, Chris. This is what you really need.

O'RIORDAN-ADJAH: Yes.

WIRT: If I get suspended, but I wanna turn it around and come back – remember positive – one of the things I would be thinking as a student, “Well, they’re gonna know about my history.” No. Here’s what I tell students, “No faculty member can go to some database, type in ‘Jonathan Wirt’ and see if he ever got trouble because they can’t access it, and it’s none of their business. The only person who would know is the one who reported you in the first place. Other than that, that’s it.”

O'RIORDAN-ADJAH: You all heard it. Again, first, don’t get in trouble. But if you do, do realize that you get, you have some help, too.

OK, let’s switch gears here a little bit. What is Title IX?

WIRT: Well, Title IX is, is a, is an area that, really, we have our own department that handles that. So, I would be amiss if I tried to be the expert on that.

O'RIORDAN-ADJAH: OK.

WIRT: Dr. Laura Bethea, it’s her area. But there are areas where, in Student Activities, life, very serious matters, harassment, we can get into a whole list of topics. But I would, I would defer to that department. It would make for an interview with, with Laura.

O'RIORDAN-ADJAH: Right. Thanks for putting in that plug because I reached out to her, too, for an interview.

WIRT: So, so I’ll leave that, OK? I’ll leave that as like a carrot for Laura.

O'RIORDAN-ADJAH: So, no, I do like, first of all, again, I think this is a very good opportunity for students to know that, if their faculty reports them or fills out a form to Student Conduct, there is a process, that they also are given the opportunity for their words to be heard. I call students when students, part of the process, when a faculty says, “OK, here’s a student that is cheating.” I reach out to them to say, “This is what your faculty presented.”



Sometimes, they have very hard evidence that you cannot go against, but I try to tell them it's not the end of the world. You, you're gonna get a first warning. I actually tried to be a little bit tough on first, first-timers than you guys are, but I think, on the positive, again, it's a, you know, students should know that it's not, you're not kicked out immediately. But most importantly, don't repeat this act because, if it goes down the road, it could be pretty bad, as we talked about.

WIRT: Right.

O'RIORDAN-ADJAH: OK. Is there anything else you want to add to this conversation in terms of what students need to know about Student Conduct? And, oh, by the way, where, where are your offices if students wanna just ...

WIRT: Well, kind of the, the formality, again, this is seeing us as a resource. So, OK, I, you've got images like being sent to the principal's office or bad cop or whatever, the, the bottom line is, is that we are going to provide you an open dialogue to share your point. And let me just say this, we are in a position to be a voice, an advocate for the student, OK? We want to mediate differences, but remember, if you're referred, it's not the end of the world. As a matter of fact, it will give you opportunities to be programmed in different resources.

And we call it rights and responsibilities. A student has a right to file a complaint on a faculty member. How do they know how to find that form? I show them the form. I'll pull the form up. So, they have a right to file a complaint, so sometimes, they don't even know how to do that, if they have a case. We provide them resources like the ILC. One of the foundational responses we give, Chris, is that, and, by the way, let me just say this, during the COVID, our highest cases have not been in conduct. That's been in academic integrity, which is plagiarism and cheating, and one of the reasons is it's not because they're bad students. There was a misunderstanding. The instructor could have said, "You do not access this site during the exam." Well, the student either forgot or overlooked it, and they got reported. Doesn't make them a bad person. We just learn from our mistakes, and that is why we give the first incident a pass. I mean, that is the beautiful thing about Wake Tech. We are in an educational environment where we're learning.

You said something about conduct. We work very closely with Campus Police, OK? And to this point about Title IX and that type of thing ...

O'RIORDAN-ADJAH: Maybe that's why students think you're part of the whole conspiracy with the ...

WIRT: Yes! Yes! We're in a conspiracy with the police, and we're tracking everybody down. No, actually here's what I would, my elevator speech.

O'RIORDAN-ADJAH: OK.

WIRT: Th three-minute, two-minute. Here it is. You ready? And you can borrow this one, too.

O'RIORDAN-ADJAH: Thank you.

WIRT: A safe and secure student is a successful student.

O'RIORDAN-ADJAH: I like that.

WIRT: OK?

O'RIORDAN-ADJAH: Yes.

WIRT: My job is provide a safe, secure environment. I do that in collaboration with Wellness, the Ombudsman, the ILC, and I know in this culture, sometimes, the Campus Police. These are sworn officers that are here not to give parking tickets or to chase people, get people in trouble. They're here to provide a safe, secure environment for faculty members, but also students. And by the way, we meet students that bring in issues off campus, and we can use Student Conduct and Campus Police to put in programs like safety walks, security, to provide students with a safe, secure environment to be successful.

O'RIORDAN-ADJAH: I would love to just close with that. I really don't know what to, to add to that. That was great. That was great, Jon. That was, that's perfect. So, usually, even though, again, I like that statement you just made, I would like to close on that. I'm not gonna close on that because one of the questions that I've been asking everyone that I interview is what advice or suggestion do you have to motivate students to keep going on in college?

WIRT: I'm, I've got it. You ready?

O'RIORDAN-ADJAH: Yes.

WIRT: First of all, to all the students, and this is what I say in my conduct meetings, thank you for choosing Wake Tech. You're at the largest community college in North Carolina. OK? But there's the end of that sentence. We're the third largest community college system in the United States. And I know you have a Florida background, but they don't even rank anywhere near as far as number. California, Texas and then yours truly. Your students that are listening to this should feel great because they're not only at the largest community college, by the way, there's 58, but we're the third-largest community college system in America. That is the type of student we have. That means they've already made the best decision. They've already been positioned. We're gonna help them navigate through and be successful, and a conduct officer, an instructor, a librarian, whoever it is, we're all here with the same mission.

O'RIORDAN-ADJAH: There you have it. I, I, I really can't close it any better than that, students. But just remember, I'm still here for you. I will go to whoever you want me to go talk to. We've done the counselors. We've done the ombudsman. It's a very, very great honor today to have the Student Conduct. He's not a bad cop. Remember, he's actually here for you. Go to him when you need the help.

Stay tuned. Next time.