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Addressing Individual and Community Needs in the Aftermath of Campus Sexual Misconduct: Restorative Justice as a Way Forward in the Re-Entry Process

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Abstract

Restorative justice is an approach to incidents of harm involving a high level of support and accountability for people who cause harm. To date, there is no federal regulation nor commonly applied standard of care for re-entry to campus by a student who has been found responsible for sexual misconduct. Restorative justice re-entry circles represent a promising approach to the reintegration of students, taking into account the needs of the individual survivor, the student who violated policy, and the safety concerns of the campus community. Using a case study, this article outlines an example of a re-entry circle and discusses the lessons learned with regard to concerns about the student's mental health status, issues of race and racism on campus, and the role of a trauma-informed approach to circle practice in incidents involving a complex interplay of mental health, social status, and race on campus.

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Introduction

In the aftermath of reported incidents of sexual misconduct, campus communities are often confronted with multiple perspectives that can encourage divisiveness and distrust: "Campuses are sheltered, highly social environments, where the spread of personal information can create a hostile environment for victims as well as respondents, regardless of the factual nature of the information" (Harper, Maskaly, Kirkner & Lorenz, 2017, p. 307). Survivors often feel that their experiences of victimization are not taken seriously by their institutions (Smith & Freyd, 2013; Sulkowicz, 2014). Respondents also distrust their institutions' handling of these cases and many have filed suits against their institutions, often regarding respondents' due process rights, including the right to cross-examination and disagreements over the standard of evidence [preponderance of the evidence] used in Title IX adjudication processes in the United States (Harper, Maskaly, Kirkner, & Lorenz, 2017). Additionally, because colleges and universities are not criminal courts, these institutions have limited capacities for conducting fact-finding (Kaplan, 2016), which can further exacerbate feelings of mistrust or a sense of harm by the institution itself toward the complainant and the respondent. Given the broad range of behaviors that constitute sexual misconduct, according to the U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights (OCR), a one size fits all approach to adjudication of these incidents does not seem appropriate (Koss, Wilgus, & Williamsen, 2014). Therefore, thoughtful, tailored responses to sexual misconduct are required at all stages of the investigation, adjudication, finding of responsibility, and reintegration after a respondent has been separated from campus for a period of time. While the Department of Education Office for Civil Rights (OCR) has provided guidance to colleges and universities regarding adjudication of sexual misconduct cases under Title IX, currently in the U.S., there are no model policies nor shared set of practices for responsibly addressing a respondent's return to campus after a period of separation. Thus, alternative solutions are needed to repair the harm experienced by survivors, ensure accountability for the student who committed harm and violated University policy, and to ensure the safety of the campus community.

Title IX

Campus administrators' primary response to sexual and gender-based misconduct is determined by college policy. While the behavior may be a crime and survivors may choose to go to the police, administrators are responsible for offering support and accommodations, and for determining whether or not the behavior is a violation of campus policy. In the United States, many aspects of campus policy are mandated by federal law, including Title IX, the Clery Act, and the Violence Against Women Act (VAWA), and institutions are accountable to guidance from the Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights (OCR), which enforces federal regulations (Karp, Forthcoming). OCR guidance under the Obama Administration received widespread attention in the media and spurred changes at colleges and universities around the country

¹ In this article, we use the terms survivor, complainant, and harmed party interchangeably. We avoid the stigmatizing term "offender" in favor of "respondent," "accused student," and instead use first-person phrasing such "student who caused harm" or "student that violated policy."

(Eilperin, 2016). Changes to the guidance by the Trump Administration have created controversy and confusion about how campuses should best respond to sexual misconduct (Gersen, 2017). Even though student affairs administrators prioritize educational and developmental learning outcomes in their conduct practices, the current climate on campuses has become highly adversarial, limiting an administrator's ability to hold students accountable and promote positive developmental outcomes (Williams, 2015).

Restorative Justice

Restorative justice is a global social movement that includes a variety of practices in schools, universities, and juvenile and criminal justice. The approach has been used to address minor crimes and policy violations, other offenses that affect community climate but do not violate conduct codes, as well as serious offending and human rights violations (Umbreit & Armour, 2011). RJ has evolved from numerous faith-based and indigenous justice traditions and strives to be inclusive and respectful of cultural values, beliefs, and practices. In the context of sexual and gender-based misconduct, RJ circle practices may be employed in prevention and education, trauma-informed RJ conferencing may be used for resolution of some types of cases, and Circles of Support and Accountability may be used for students returning from suspension or transferring. Since RJ is guided by a set of values, no one set of practices define it, and new practices may be developed and applied as needed.

Restorative justice may provide a way to ensure accountability and increase the potential for positive outcomes for all stakeholders. Unlike mediation, RJ requires that the responsible party accept responsibility for their actions prior to participation (McGlynn, 2011; Zehr, 2002). RJ provides both a high level of accountability and support for the responsible party so that they can address the harms, gain skills and insight in order not to re-offend, and to be reintegrated into the community after the incident has been addressed. Research has demonstrated that restorative practices produce high levels of satisfaction for participants, even in cases of severe violence (Sherman & Strang, 2007). Restorative responses may offer a more humane response for all parties involved, and one that is better aligned with institutional goals of education and student development. In Australia, RJ has been used successfully for juvenile sex offending (Daly, 2006). More generally, research evidence demonstrates that RJ, compared to court processes, can better reduce recidivism (Sherman, Strang, Mayo-Wilson, Woods & Ariel, 2015), reduce victims' post-traumatic stress symptoms (Angelet al., 2014), increase all parties' satisfaction with the justice process (Sherman & Strang, 2007), and increase respondent learning and development (Karp & Sacks, 2014).

The Problem of Suspension and Reintegration

National data on suspensions for Title IX violations are unavailable. Some institutions publish adjudication data. For example, Yale University provides data on formal adjudication of Title IX complaints including findings and sanctions (Yale University, 2017). Summarizing findings from their reports between 2012 and 2016, we found that Yale formally adjudicated 60 complaints against undergraduate and graduate students. Of these 60 complaints, 45 students were found in violation of the institution's sexual misconduct policy. Of these 45 students, 20 were suspended and seven were expelled. Extrapolating from these data, suspensions are a common outcome in Title IX adjudication, accounting for almost half of the sanctioning outcomes.

Suspensions do not guarantee behavioral change, nor do they provide much reassurance to the complainant or wider campus community that the student will be responsible upon return.

We are not aware of any campus that has a formal policy to address the reintegration process. We reviewed the Title IX policies of 20 institutions, the U.S. News top 10 liberal arts colleges, top five public universities and top five private universities. Our reasoning for this selection was that these are all highly resourced institutions, likely to have well-developed policies. Not one of these institutions described a policy for reintegration after suspension. Although practice may include thoughtful, supportive guidance for the respondent and advocacy support for a survivor, such practice is not captured in their formal policies. We see this as a significant gap given the potential for stigma, revictimization, and a hostile campus climate in the aftermath of an incident involving sexual misconduct.

In K-12 schools, restorative practices are increasingly common (Armour, 2016; Karp & Frank, 2016). Practitioners advocate the use of "reentry circles" for students who are returning from suspension. A popular example of a reentry circle is documented on video by the organization Restorative Justice for Oakland Youth (2017). Boyes-Watson and Pranis (2015), outline a "Welcome Back after Suspension Circle" as having the following elements: identifying the strengths and capacities the returning student can bring to the school; strengths or gifts that circle participants can offer to help support the student's successful reentry; identifying and addressing concerns about the return; obligations of the student to respond to remaining harms caused by the offending behavior; and practical next steps to ensure success.

Rarely have campuses developed strong systems to manage the return of students to campus after suspension or for their integration into a new campus community as transfer students. Increasingly, such students are subject to campus-wide concern, anger, and fear (Kingkade, 2014; Mulholland, 2015). Circles of Support and Accountability (CoSA) are a restorative practice used to assist high-risk people incarcerated for sex crimes that are being released to the community (McWhinnie, Wilson & Brown, 2013). It is a model of proactive and positive community engagement that recognizes that successful reintegration is not solely dependent on the individual, but also on the community support system. This model may be adapted for campuses and could provide community reassurance and better outcomes for key stakeholders.

In general, people who engage in socially unacceptable conduct are more likely to change if they are provided with opportunities to address their transgressions, learn new ways of behaving, and are able to re-enter their respective communities with support and a reasonable accountability framework (Colvin, Cullen, & Ven, 2002). Due to the strong negative response most communities demonstrate regarding sexual violence, best practice initiatives are often difficult to implement. Emotionally charged reactions often follow incidents of sexual violence on college and university campuses across the United States, as well as in Canada and other similar nations (Gray, 2014). The highly contentious nature of these situations has sometimes left few opportunities for support and advocacy for parties on both sides, and it is that void that early purveyors sought to address by establishing what later became known as a Circle of Support and Accountability or CoSA.

A CoSA is a collection of 4-6 community volunteers who pledge to assist individuals convicted of sex crimes in their attempts to integrate with a community. These volunteers are supported by community professionals and the program is managed by a circle coordinator. The original intent was to address shortcomings associated with re-entry, especially when those incarcerated had little or no access to services that would assist them in remaining safe. In CoSA terminology, the person-of-risk is known as the core member of the circle. The circle offers community support while the core member commits to doing everything in their power to avoid

reoffending and the situations that put them at risk to do so. The circle holds the core member accountable to this commitment through regular meetings and checking to make sure agreements are upheld. It also serves as a conduit for communication should concerns arise. This role is crucial to the needs of communities that are serious about risk management and, ultimately, gaining empowerment as they heal from the wounds of sexual and other violence.

In 1994, two particularly high-risk individuals incarcerated for sex offenses, Charlie and Wray, were released to the community in Ontario, Canada. Significant media coverage surrounded each of these releases, with the public being told that they were at extremely high risk to sexually reoffend in a short period of time. All of the usual community social service agencies declined to work with these men, citing concerns over the particularly high-risk profile each presented (Wilson & Picheca, 2005). In both situations, local citizens expressed fear for the safety of their families and friends. Despite the protests and threats intended to drive the men from the community, in both cases, church leaders organized groups of volunteers from their congregations to assist them with their integration back into the community. Even though both were at the highest risk for reoffending, over a period of years, Charlie and Wray and their respective Circles proved that they could be law-abiding citizens (Wilson & McWhinnie, 2010). Following the success of the both of these pioneering efforts, the Mennonite Central Committee of Ontario sought funding from the Canadian government to establish the first CoSA program.

Since the time of the two inaugural Circles noted above, hundreds of CoSAs have been established throughout Canada and in Europe, the United Kingdom, and the United States. Peerreviewed studies of the model have reported important data regarding quantitative and qualitative outcomes. Quantitatively, in comparison to matched control samples, men in a CoSA reoffended sexually at rates 70% less than their circle-less peers (Bates, Williams, Wilson & Wilson, 2013; Wilson, Cortoni & McWhinnie, 2009; Wilson, Picheca & Prinzo, 2007).

In terms of the human effect of CoSAs, qualitative reviews have identified some of the key restorative and public safety elements at play. Evaluating a CoSA program in Vermont, Fox (2013, p.9) found, "Core members expressed more positive senses of self as contributing members to society, a commitment to pro-social relationships, a sense of mutual obligation toward and trust of circle members, and somewhat greater optimism for the future." Based on her interviews with core members, circle members, and reentry coordinators, Fox argues that the success of CoSAs is based on the relationships developed in the circle:

The normative expectations of the core member are communicated through a trusting and honest relationship. The genuineness of the relationships models positive relationships for the core member and legitimizes the intrusion of the volunteers in core members' lives. In other words, the team only has moral authority because of the caring and respectful relationships formed (Fox, 2013, p. 14).

As research indicates that the CoSA model works well in non-academic settings, its potential for successful adaptation to address risk on campus is promising.

Although some students who violate campus sexual and gender-based misconduct policies will require criminal prosecution and/or expulsion from the institution, others will remain enrolled or be allowed to reenter after some period of suspension. Implementation of a CoSA-type approach would provide opportunities for student who return to address their issues in a meaningful and socially accountable manner while providing for enhanced monitoring and service provision. The circle works to ensure victim and community safety while supporting students to demonstrate change and succeed academically. At the request of the survivor or respondent, and with approval by the administration, a CoSA could be offered to an individual

who wants to remain on campus and repair the relationship with the harmed party and campus community. Volunteers could be recruited or appointed from faculty, administrative staff, and the student body, according to principles established in the broader CoSA community. The length of time a student would remain in a CoSA would be determined by the members of their circle in cooperation with the professional support circle, but a minimum of six months to a year is likely necessary to achieve optimal outcomes.

Method

Because there is not any consistent use of CoSA models for sexual misconduct on college campuses, a case study (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994) is presented below to illustrate the process, content, and challenges associated with the successful implementation of CoSAs on a campus. While there are significant limitations associated with case study models, such as lack of generalizability (Noor, 2008; Yin, 2015), the case study method is an effective teaching tool to introduce new approaches or ways of thinking about a given problem (Wylie & Griffin, 2012). As well, case studies provide insight about the complexities of real world problems (Noor, 2008), of which campus sexual misconduct and its aftermath are certainly one. Informed consent for this study was obtained from the two circle facilitators, "Daniel" and "Tina", who serve as the subjects for this study. As well, all names have been changed in order to protect individuals' identities.

Case Study Findings

Background for the circle

Based on interviews with the two circle facilitators, this case study chronicles the use of RJ circle practice for an undergraduate student's return to a U.S. university campus after a period of separation due to an incident of sexual misconduct. This re-entry circle was convened by two facilitators who were not members of the campus community; they were contracted by the university to facilitate the circle based on their extensive experience with restorative justice facilitation and issues of sexual victimization, diversity and inclusion. Daniel had familiarity with the campus community, as he had previously conducted training for the staff in the aftermath of a series of campus tragedies. The staff who participated in the circle included three representatives from the Dean of Students Office, one person from Academic Affairs, one person from the international study office, and a representative from the campus counseling center. In addition, there were three support people for the returning student who were members of the campus community: a male student leader and two faculty members. In the CoSA model, victims are not included in the circle, but a victim advocate may be. By the time the re-entry circle was enacted, the complainant, "Sarah", had already graduated.

The student of concern, "Ivan", was a junior when the incident of sexual misconduct occurred. As a student of color at a predominantly White institution, Ivan was involved in significant leadership roles on campus. He was considered an influential student leader in the Black community on campus and also one who was well-acquainted with student life staff due to his role as a representative of students' concerns about racist incidents on campus. At the time of the incident of sexual misconduct, Ivan was struggling with significant mental health issues, including erratic outbursts, paranoia, delusions, and sudden bursts of aggression, all of which contributed to the decision to have him take a leave of absence from the campus. Ivan's mental health concerns are central to understanding the context in which he committed the harm, was separated from the institution, and his return to campus.

The accusation in the case was based on the complainant's experience of coercion for sexual activity. He was found responsible and sanctioned. It was not clear whether he did not understand what he did, whether it was intentional, or a result of the impact of mental illness on his perceptions. (These questions lingered even as the circle process unfolded.) The re-entry circle was included in the sanctioning process as a prerequisite to Ivan's request to study abroad after having been found responsible. It is important to note that Ivan would be going abroad after the circle, rather than returning directly to campus.

According to the facilitators, the staff members were motivated to address the harm and repair relationships with Ivan through a re-entry circle because they viewed him as having a low risk of re-offending. In addition, the staff had received previous training in restorative justice practices; the elapsed time between the incident and the re-entry circle had created social distance; the staff involved knew this student well; and the Title IX adjudication process was complicated by his significant mental health issues, which were undiagnosed at the time of the incident but had adversely impacted his interpersonal interactions in many facets of his life on campus.

Preparations for the CoSA were done by the facilitators in conjunction with the conduct administrator. This included several phone calls between Daniel and the administrator to establish the frame for the circle, with a focus on the RJ process, the introduction of Tina as an additional facilitator, and some communication about the case content. Since race was an important component of the case, Tina was recruited, in part, because she is a woman of color with a long history of anti-racism work and anti-sexual violence activism, which made her uniquely situated to this complex incident. Importantly, also during this period, the co-facilitators had multiple points of contact with the returning student, Ivan, in order to establish trust and the neutrality of the facilitators' role. These conversations gave Ivan the opportunity to share his concerns with the facilitators, as well as to identify support people for him who could be invited to participate in the circle. It was important for Ivan to understand that the facilitators were not acting as agents of the institution, but as guides to develop a plan that would provide support and accountability for him in his return.

Pre-conferencing process

During the pre-conferencing process, the facilitators went to the campus and interviewed 8 of the 9 circle participants, followed by a final phone call with Ivan. These interviews ranged in length based on the participants' availability. In each conversation, the facilitators explained the RJ circle process and previewed the rounds of questions with each person. As time permitted, Daniel and Tina also asked each person the following questions: 1) How could they serve as a resource to Ivan? 2) What concerns did they have about Ivan and his re-entry process? And 3) what was their connection to this incident and to Ivan? The facilitators believed more time with each participant would have been helpful in order to unpack this complex story, but the time spent with participants provided important insights about its layers.

During the pre-conferencing phase, when the facilitators spoke with Ivan, he expressed anger and a sense of isolation after interacting with the staff during the formal Title IX process. The facilitators listened and reflected back what they heard Ivan say, reiterating that the focus of the re-entry circle was to provide support to Ivan *and* to address the needs of the community members with whom he would be studying abroad. During the pre-conferencing, staff members expressed concerns about institutional racism, tokenism, and fears about possible racial revictimization of Ivan in the circle as a result of these dynamics on campus. There were also

concerns about the timing of the circle, as Ivan would not be returning directly to the campus, but re-enrolling as a student and studying abroad first.

The Re-Entry Circle

The re-entry circle is structured by elements common to restorative circle practices (Boyes-Watson & Pranis, 2015). These include the use of a "talking piece" (a symbolic object that is passed from speaker to speaker); circular turn-taking as the talking piece is passed sequentially around the circle; and phases of the circle that begin with questions or activities that help to establish trust, progress to questions of concern, and then collective brainstorming to develop a plan for action—in this case a plan for reintegration support. Between circle rounds, facilitators may summarize major themes, ask follow-up questions, or create opportunities for open, unstructured discussion, particularly when brainstorming next steps.

The questions posed in this re-entry circle included: 1) Can you describe a time in which you faced a difficult reintegration or community transition? 2) How are you connected to the issue at hand? 3) What happened from your perspective? 4) What concerns do we need to address? 5) What needs do we have to meet? 6) What plan will address those concerns and needs?

In their reflections on this circle, the facilitators observed that there was a great deal of sadness about this incident of sexual misconduct, as Ivan was a well-respected student leader on campus. There appeared to be broken relationships between Ivan and many of the staff members who were present, and these personal relationships among administrators and this student added a layer of complexity to the circle. The concerns expressed by participants included a variety of themes. Ivan expressed concerns about maintaining his mental health, peers' potential negative perceptions of his mental health status, lost student leadership opportunities due to the finding of responsibility, and frustration about the formal adjudication process. Administrators were also concerned about Ivan's mental health and shared concerns about inadvertently causing additional harm to his mental health in this process. There were also concerns about how Ivan would receive necessary support while studying abroad, as well as his on-campus support system, given the broken relationships with several administrators with whom he had previously been very close. Almost all of the circle participants expressed explicit concerns about race and racism on campus, and how the campus climate could affect Ivan's overall well-being and his reintegration to the campus community.

Commitments/Outcomes from the Circle

To meet the needs of this student and the campus community, the group identified outcomes at all levels of the university: individual, interpersonal, group and institutional. At the individual level, several members of the circle committed to regular check-ins with Ivan throughout his time abroad. As well, two members of the Dean of Students' Office agreed to serve as transition liaisons for Ivan upon his return to campus. For his part, Ivan agreed to participate in a facilitated conversation with the student leader who attended the circle in order to address peers' concerns about him upon his return to campus. At the group level, the counseling center staff and members of the faculty agreed to reinvigorate efforts to address mental health concerns, with a focus on the mental health needs of students of color on campus. At the institutional level, the Dean of Students' Office committed to reviewing the campus Title IX process for best practices, as well as ways to increase communication, transparency, and support for all parties involved in the process. The student leader who was present also agreed to raise concerns about mental health care needs among students of color with the Board of Trustees.

Discussion

There are a variety of important themes from this re-entry circle that are relevant to campuses exploring re-entry circles as a method for reintegrating students into the fabric of campus life in the aftermath of an incident involving sexual misconduct: students' mental health; institutional racism; the timing of the CoSA; and the composition of these circles. To elaborate, Ivan's mental health status was a critical factor in this case; it was not clear the degree to which his mental health interfered with his decision-making abilities and it was a difficult topic to address openly in the circle, in part because key participants, such as the counseling center staff, were bound by strict confidentiality and could not disclose their observations or the details of Ivan's treatment trajectory.

As noted previously, concerns about the impact of institutional racism on Ivan (and other students) weighed heavily on the circle participants and diminished trust among all parties in this circle. This may be cause for general concern as there is some evidence that Black male students are disproportionately likely to be accused of sexual misconduct (Rice Lave, 2016; Yoffe, 2017). As well, there was clearly distress among the circle participants about this process as a possible way of re-victimizing Ivan, who had been an important leader in student-led anti-racism protests around the time that the incident of harm occurred.

Because the circle was a requirement for Ivan's desire to study abroad, the timing of the circle itself presented two significant challenges: limited support for Ivan, who would be going abroad rather than returning directly to the campus community; and given that he would be abroad, no follow-up circle would be available to him during that critical transition period.

Finally, because the administrator who led the formal adjudication process also participated in the circle process, the facilitators found that Ivan often focused on wanting to readjudicate his formal case. He expressed great distrust of this administrator, which ultimately made the work of the circle more difficult. Given these dynamics, as well as the unmet needs of faculty and staff in the circle whose lives were also adversely impacted by campus incidents of racism, activism, and mental health-related events, the composition of the circle may have needed adjusting and further opportunities to gather were needed in order to meaningfully address each of these critical concerns.

Conclusion

Each case is unique. Cases may vary based on race, campus climate, mental health status, clarity of the process, the nature of the formal process that may have preceded it, and so on. Based on this case, the following recommendations are suggestions for successful approaches to restorative justice reintegration practices: While a one-time re-entry circle may have some benefit, the CoSA model is an *ongoing process*, which provides campuses with multiple opportunities to build trust, offer support, and to hold students accountable. Given the social justice issues raised in this re-entry circle, multiple meetings would also provide time to address institutional and systemic barriers to students' meaningful participation in campus life. Finally, RJ is a set of practices that are consistent with trauma-informed approaches to justice. Trauma-informed care is based on "safety, trustworthiness, choice, collaboration, and empowerment" (Karp et al., 2016).

Professionals using RJ models for re-entry should be well-trained, modeling for participants the value of a trauma-informed approach, organizing a re-entry process that meets the needs of survivors and respondents, and ensuring the circle considers the safety and well-being of the entire campus community. Based on the gleanings from this case study, we believe

restorative reintegration circles provide a new and innovative method for managing the return of students to campus after suspensions for sexual misconduct. It is a practice that may meet the needs of the returning student, reassure the campus community, and provide a forum to address larger systemic issues that are often embedded in case management of reintegration to campus.

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