

DANIEL SWINTON, ASSISTANT DEAN, STUDENT CONDUCT, VANDERBILT UNIVERSITY

## Overcome isolation by seeking input, reaching out, volunteering

On-the-job isolation can steal your joy and stifle your success. That's a hard reality Daniel Swinton learned how to rise above.

When Vanderbilt University hired him as assistant director of student conduct, Swinton and three others shared an office in a building separated from other student affairs staff members. That location, along with being a recent law school grad enrolled in a doctoral program, resulted in Swinton feeling a lack of professional support.

"I struggled to fit in, to figure out the culture of the institution, the division, and particularly the field of student affairs," recalled Swinton. He's now assistant dean and director of Vanderbilt's Office of Student Conduct and Academic Integrity and the new president of the Association for Student Conduct Administration. "I felt uncomfortable in meetings, made a number of mistakes, and felt I wasn't taken seriously by my peers. I tried so hard to be viewed as competent and to garner respect from colleagues but felt I was failing."

Then it hit him — he was like a first-year student. That comparison empowered him to take control of his situation.

"Instead of sitting in my office, I asked some key campus peers if I could join them for lunch. I knew one office had an open invitation to eat lunch in their conference room, so I showed up," Swinton said.

The next time he led a training session, he asked for input and guidance from the most experienced member of that group. He even asked for help and insight with difficult issues from a staff member with whom he had a fairly antagonistic relationship. And he volunteered to help with homecoming and other events.

"I took control of my situation," Swinton said. "All the problems didn't disappear, but people came to see me differently and I began to feel like a member of the team."

If you feel isolated, demonstrate you're teachable, approachable, and a part of the team, Swinton said. Show respect for team members by asking for their input and guidance, he advised.

"Take control of your situation by recognizing you can't control others' reactions or opinions of you. But you can create opportunities for them to see you in

a different light," he said.

Fostering connections with colleagues helped Swinton achieve success on an institutional level as well. To ensure institutional uniformity of conduct sanctions, Swinton led the development of a case auditing process.

The process randomly selects 5 percent of conduct cases from a specific period. Staff members check files for proper form completion, length of time between incidents and decisions, and adequate notation of the hearing officers' reasoning. They compare the type and extent of sanctions meted out in similar cases. A group meets to discuss discrepancies, and any indicators for additional training as well as positive feedback.

To implement the same process at your institution, develop a checklist to ensure you review pertinent points. "The review isn't about getting people in trouble. It's about training, growth and adjustment going forward," Swinton said. So avoid judgment and allow open expression of opinions, disagreements and concerns, he said.

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### WORD OF ADVICE

#### Embrace opportunities to chat with parents

When parents call your office about their son's or daughter's conduct violation, it can be tempting to avoid them at all costs. But Daniel Swinton, assistant dean and director of Vanderbilt's Office of Student Conduct and Academic Integrity, says you should take that call — as painful as it may be.

"Parents tend to get rather defensive, frustrated and want to step in and resolve the 'problem' on behalf of their student," Swinton said. "By listening, without being defensive, and striving to understand what they want, some problems resolve themselves."

He then asks the parents to have their son or daughter make an appointment so he can work with the student, rather than the parents. He follows up with parents afterward, too.

"It shows you're thoughtful, reasoned, and care about their individual situation. Parents may disagree with my decision, or that of one of my staff, but knowing they were heard and that we did not run away or try to bully our way through helps soften the situation," Swinton said. ■