NOTES FROM THE FIELD

Quit playing it safe: taking a restorative approach to campus safety and belonging

Jake MacIsaac and Melissa MacKay

We come from very different backgrounds and lived identities; yet, we share common values and a commitment to making a difference. We both see campus safety at the core of our work. The work that we do is often the work that many others would rather not: it is complex and emotional, uncomfortable, frequently with high-stakes and it involves journeying alongside those we work with for at least part of their journey forward, after a harm has occurred. While this approach can be found fairly readily in those who work in the field of human rights and sexual violence, it is not always the experience one expects when they call security. As a central theme of our work we talk about safety a lot. Safety means much more than guarding against physical harm or property crimes on campus. Safety, or feeling safe, depends on the culture and climate of a place and the values of the community. Safety requires feeling included, it is very difficult to describe a sense of safety without belonging and support. Most of all safety can entail a completely unique set of needs for each individual we meet. Helping people define their safety needs and plan for them is at the heart of our approach.

1. Jake, security services

So, it turns out that by traditional standards, I am not a very good security guard. It is not that I am without ample opportunity to be one. With over 18,000 students, thousands more faculty and staff, across four campuses and with daily checks of the millions of square feet in more than 100 buildings, I should probably be farther along than I am presently. Say nothing of the thousands of parking spots to patrol to ensure vehicles are properly placed between the lines. You are likely starting to get the picture. Much of what folks expect of their campus security team feels like a laundry list of routine tasks caught in the cycle of lock and unlock; rinse and repeat. As a biracial person that identifies as an African-Canadian Cis-gender male, working a stereotypical ‘blue collar’ job, believe me when I say that understanding how people choose to identify is complex but necessary work because it is deeply tied to feelings of personal safety and community

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belonging. Taking time to understand how people show up in the world has proven to be an essential step in tailoring individualised safety plans.

Innovation in the security industry tends to confront security tasks with technology: higher resolution cameras; swipe cards over keys; acquisition of more fuel-efficient patrol vehicles. It is easy to get stuck believing that building security and asset protection are the main drivers for the job. The push to check the box of the daily tasks leads security teams to focus on the mechanics of the service versus the purpose. Buildings are deemed to be safe without ever checking in with the people who occupy them. This is the trap of transactional thinking. For years, our campus security team operated this way until presented with the opportunity to think differently about our role. What would it mean to find out from our campus community what they need to feel safe while on campus? The change required a shift in thinking: away from a transactional mindset to a relational mindset. A restorative approach was the key to this shift in mindset.

Taking a restorative approach to campus safety helped our security team evolve into a people first, more student centric, service. While adding in the ‘people first’ variable makes the work more challenging, at the same time it became infinitely more rewarding. As personal safety can be quite nuanced, it resists the cookie cutter approach of transactional mindsets. A diligent security professional will ask variations of very familiar restorative questions early on in the personal safety planning process: Who has been harmed? What do they need? What needs to happen to make things safe? Approaching safety conversations restoratively allows for a thorough examination of the situation: its context and causes, and to look beyond ‘what happened?’ to ask ‘what matters most about what happened?’ A natural consequence to thinking differently was that it translated almost immediately into the need to work differently.

‘I love how collaborative my campus security team is!’ Something said by almost no one ever, on any campus, anywhere. And yet, it really is the key to working differently, through on-campus collaboration with other restorative mindset service providers. There is a collective synergy when the work is undertaken in this way. The consistency in core values, language and practices provide for a holistic approach that places a high priority on hearing people tell their stories while holding non-judgmental space for listening to each other.

It is more than solving issues together or even just describing the way we work. Our commitment to a restorative approach means taking each opportunity to see and understand how things are interconnected. Fostering good collaboration across departments brings in perspectives, skills, knowledge and experiences that would not otherwise be as easily accessible were it not for intentionally thinking this way. When given the opportunity to work alongside colleagues, such as Melissa, there is always a mutual respect for the role and subject matter expertise of the other person. Through co-facilitation of large restorative processes when things have gone wrong on campus, Melissa and I have grown to appreciate the congruency of values we share in approaching this work. This has helped shape the way we work restoratively on-campus on a day-to-day basis.
2. Melissa, human rights and equity

I identify as an intersectional-feminist, working within Human Rights and Equity Services from a trauma informed perspective to prevent and respond to sexual violence on campus. In many places security and human rights are at best unlikely partners and at worst engaged in adversarial and antagonistic relationships – in either scenario they are not working together or sharing information. Certainly, in feminist circles, security officers (and police) are not always well-regarded colleagues. Feminists have long held that systems of authority can be re-victimising and harmful to those who have experienced sexual violence and discrimination. We also know that many communities have experienced oppressive relationships with these systems for their entire lived histories. A key aspect of the relationship between Jake and I is our commitment to shared values and restorative principles; specifically, we strive to be inclusive/intersectional, holistic, forward focused and relational (Llewellyn, 2011; Llewellyn & Llewellyn, 2015). Our restorative values guide our approach and shape our response to situations of risk and they structure our relationships with those we work with. Our values also guide how we work together. At our best we are always learning from each other and sharing our strengths – some days that involves explaining to Jake what a TERF (Trans-Exclusionary Radical Feminist) is, and some days it is me getting a lesson in investigative techniques. A working relationship that is authentic and open to learning is important to our process, especially as that is what we ask of those we work with as well.

Having security show up in a human rights space working with survivors seems misplaced to those who imagine that security would respond by prioritising institutional control of a situation. We often hear that people fear security, believing they have a direct line of communication to police and will force a report regardless of the survivor’s wishes – a tactic that can be harmful and generally inappropriate when working from a trauma informed perspective.1 Our approach is vastly different and requires that we centre the voices of those who have experienced harm, listen to them with respect and strive to understand their needs. It means that we resist making decisions for people but rather work with them and help guide their reflection at a pace that allows them to participate fully. While understanding the harm and what matters most about what happened is critical, just as crucial is understanding what needs to happen next: What are their safety needs? What are their justice needs? What are their academic needs? What sort of supports would be most helpful now? Taking a restorative approach requires that we shift to a forward focus and problem solve in a way that accompanies the survivor along their path without controlling the process or defining the way forward.

Supporting a culture of safety on campus requires that we also take a restorative approach when working with those accused of causing harm. Working with ‘respondents’, as they are often labelled, tends to be viewed as a task requiring a rigid authoritative strategy; however, there is much evidence that those types of

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1 Except in extreme circumstances when imminent community safety risks are identified that necessitate a response.
adversarial models do not actually make us much safer. They also do not allow space for people to reflect honestly on themselves, their decisions, the impact they have had or to be open to learning how to create different relationships moving forward. In my experience many folks accused of sexual violence, most often male-identified, come to my office worried or defensive. They present this way due to assumptions of a traditional response from us and we strive to disrupt this mindset through direct experience of our approach. In our experience being non-judgmental and open to hearing from them is not only unexpected, it tends to disable the barriers to introspection because they feel they are being heard differently. While we are generally delivering strong messages that their behaviour needs to change, we also find ourselves balancing our values; listening with a goal of understanding does not remove our responsibility to give honest feedback when it is clear according to our values that the person needs to reflect and understand the impact of their actions.

3. Jake and Melissa

Working with a restorative mindset has given us the opportunity to show up differently to others. We have found that people take notice of good collaboration and institutional leaders will often invite us to share our learnings. They regularly rely on what we share about trends in safety and student responses. We also help to educate the community on diversity and inclusion, bystander intervention and other topics which afford us an opportunity to demonstrate our collaborative approach.

Even more interestingly to us, given our learnings from our work at the Restorative Justice Process in the Faculty of Dentistry (Llewellyn, MacIsaac & MacKay, 2015), is when we receive invitations from our professional schools on campus to help them reflect on topics like professionalism. Of course, professionalism is not magically tied to a ‘white coat’ that when worn by the dentist they become the extra-professional caricature version of dental excellence. Professionalism is a discipline, rooted in values, modelled and practiced in community. This is true in every work setting, ours – and yours – included. For many faculties at our institution, teaching professionalism as a core aspect of their curriculum is the way of building in a framework for practice focused on safety, from abuse of authority, negligence and ensuring a standard of care. Professionalism on campus is sometimes exemplified by codes of conduct or policies but when you think about it these are deeply relational commitments. We ask people to unpack their professionalism and to understand how their values translate every day: What do they mean? How do we support each other to uphold these norms? How are we accountable to them? And how do we understand a way back when things have gone wrong? A restorative approach provides a great avenue for these conversations. Having an opportunity to reflect on all that professionalism requires allows us to have deeper conversations about caring for those around us and creating the inclusive climate and culture that supports making people feel safer.
References

