

# From a Predominantly White Campus to a Culturally Diverse Campus: Implications for Mediation

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*NOTE: This article is reprinted with permission from the June/July 1991 Issue (Vol 33) of **The Fourth R**, The Newsletter of the National Association for Mediation in Education.*

When a campus population changes from a predominantly white college campus to one that is culturally diverse, the college must make the commitment to educate both its majority and its minority students about the consequences of this change. Staff must be trained to deal with and respond to the problems and tensions that are the natural result of the altered campus demographics. To increase the number of non-white students and not to train staff will result in uncomfortable living situations for students, difficult work environments for staff, and often unflattering and unwanted articles in the local press. An institution must look beyond its internal judicial system to resolve conflict. All staff who interact with students must be trained in how to react when confronted with disputes as well as trained to resolve the conflicts which come their way by either assisting the parties in working out their differences or by calling upon the resources of the institution's mediation process.

A campus must become as aggressive in resolving conflicts as its admissions office is in recruiting students, particularly non-majority students. (I have consciously chosen to use "majority" and "minority" to mean white or Caucasian and those who are non-white. Although there are other terms available, these still seem to be the simplest way to designate the two groups.) Whenever the

campus climate is changed by including people who are "different" from what has historically been the typical student, then the majority must be educated about the nature of the incoming minorities so that they, the majority, will become at a minimum, less culturally insensitive and hopefully, more culturally aware. As the "insiders," the majority have an obligation to make the "outsiders" coming to the campus feel welcome, not vice versa. The minority students, too, must be given a sense of the environment they are entering so that expectations on both sides are realistic, thereby increasing the chances of successfully coping with the stresses of that new environment.

As a campus' demographics change, the demand by new groups for a campus voice - and a piece of campus resources brings an accompanying amount of "muscle flexing" - self-assertion, testing other groups, challenging the administration - which causes tension in the college as the groups seek to establish themselves within the larger community.

Campuses that wish to become more culturally diverse need to consider using the services of a mediation center. One of the benefits of a mediation center is the existence of a group of trained mediators who, if they were selected to reflect the changing demographics of the campus community, will be seen as a positive step the campus is taking to address the increasing diversity. The mediators can be mobilized to do outreach work in the campus community through workshops and seminars to groups such as residential life and housing, student government, international students, Greek groups, GALA (Gay and Lesbian Alliance). This outreach work can serve to teach basic conflict management skills as well as promote the services of the campus mediation center.

Another benefit is that mediation assumes that almost any conflict

can be worked out. That assumption, combined with the philosophy that we (at our Dispute Mediation Center, anyway) will mediate anything (except for child abuse) means that there are no "sacred cows."

By adopting the attitude that we will mediate anything that has a relationship to it, we make the statement that there is no conflict that cannot be brought to the mediation table. By taking that stand, we are saying, too, that there are often huge differences, but nothing so daunting that the parties cannot sit down and begin talking. This is what the mediator is trained to do: get the parties talking, acknowledge the differences, and not take sides.

At the Fall 1990 Frosh orientation at the University at Albany, the Department of Residential Life and Housing, at my suggestion, initiated a program entitled, "How Can I Live With You If You Are Different From Me?" This basic approach to problems in interpersonal relationships allows people at the most fundamental level to address uncomfortable situations that most wish would either magically disappear or be resolved. By starting out at this basic level, people are given permission to discuss taboo subjects. By training all staff to use conflict management, by teaching conflict management to special interest groups, and by sensitizing each generation of students coming to the campus, a tradition and climate of acceptance will develop so that conflict is looked upon as constructive because of the learning that can occur from it.

As the student body changes, the need to have properly trained staff increases. Professional staff need to know how to respond intelligently to the impact of a changing student population. Becoming aware of one's own ignorance of other cultures, becoming sensitive to one's own biases, seeking to learn how other cultures develop, as well as becoming comfortable working with students

and staff who are in conflict - these are the dynamics which challenge staff at a changing campus. Changes bring stress, stress requires coping: coping requires having alternative choices. Traditional judicial and counseling models alone are no longer enough. The Dean of Students can no longer serve as the ultimate arbiter to resolve conflicts brought to the campus by the changed "mix" of students.

Mediation is of particular benefit to administrators placed on the "hot seat." If a difficult racial situation is sent to mediation and the parties are not able to reach agreement, even though the conflict remains in the public eye, the campus' efforts to resolve the situation will be viewed in a much more positive manner. It will then be clear that it was the parties who were not able to reach consensus rather than that the institution or administration was ineffectual. Mediation puts the problem squarely where the resolution should be- with the parties involved. Another benefit to those who have to decide the most appropriate method of resolving a thorny problem: if the parties do not reach an agreement and the conflict has not been resolved through mediation, the path has been cleared to use the traditional judicial process and/or allow a peer review board to hear the parties and render a decision.

Mediation does not function as an office of advocacy. For a campus to use adequately the mediation/conflict management outreach approach, staff who routinely serve as advocates have to accept this basic tenet: "It does not matter who wins!" What does matter is that nobody loses and that everyone involved in the conflict learns from the resolution process so that the same mistakes are not made again.

An institution which decides to increase the number of its students of color must have in place a method for preparing all of its

students for the kind of changes each segment of the campus will experience. Mediation is a natural choice for this process.

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