

CONFLICT MANAGEMENT IN HIGHER EDUCATION REPORT

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What's in a Name?: Capturing the Essence of Campus Mediation

by Neil H. Katz, Syracuse University (emeritus)

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In 1989, when the founders of what became the Campus Mediation Center (CMC) at Syracuse University began considering a name for their new organization, the choice was easy. The organizers and their recruits would prepare for and conduct formal mediation. The organization would be housed on campus, serve campus clientele and be a resource center for material and expertise on the growing field of mediation. The name was obvious - what else but "Campus Mediation Center?" Besides, CMC was easy to remember and simple to pronounce!

In retrospect, another name for our organization might have served us better. For although mediation is at the heart of what we do, it by no means describes the comprehensive set of activities offered by the Center. This article will briefly describe those activities and suggest some names that might be more appropriate. The intent is not to rewrite the past - the purpose of using the Syracuse experience as a case study is to think more analytically about what we do, or might do, in our campus centers, how we might more accurately portray those activities to our many publics, and more effectively design and deliver our interventions. In doing so, we might get more support and more clients for our services, and be more helpful to the many universities and colleges who are beginning to create a center at their school.

The Syracuse University Experience

Almost from the beginning, the calls for service at CMC stretched our definitions of the kinds of interventions we had expected to provide. Members of our founding committee had all been trained by one of the New York State Community Dispute Settlement Centers. The bulk of our training was in the stages and techniques of formal, face to face mediation. However, one of our first calls was from a residence hall advisor who said she needed help in turning around a destructive

conflict going on amongst the 30 first year women on her floor. Could we do something?

After more discussion with the client and some amongst ourselves, we decided to send a three person intervention team to conduct a team building exercise. With the active cooperation of the CMC facilitators and the participants, the women articulated what they wanted for their group and from each other, what resources they had to help them achieve what they wanted, and what obstacles might get in the way. We then assisted them in problem solving some ways to overcome the identified obstacles, and helped them establish norms and regulations to guide their behavior in ways congruent with what they wanted from one another. The session went well, the women were involved and invested in the process and outcomes and, according to the resident advisor, relationships considerably improved after the intervention. However, the intervention that we chose and conducted was not the formal mediation session for which we had been trained and that we expected to deliver to our clients. We had to draw on the wider expertise of our staff members to enlarge our intervention options.

This design and delivery of an intervention outside the boundaries of formal mediation proved to be more than an aberration. Over the five years of CMC's existence, in addition to conducting about 100 mediations, we have also offered numerous training workshops, action research/process consultation organizational interventions, and team building sessions. We have facilitated contentious meetings and settled many disputes through conciliation, without the partners ever meeting face to face. The time devoted to the design and delivery of these other activities has, contrary to our original expectations, exceeded the effort put into formal mediation. This is not to say they are any more or less valuable than formal mediation. It is to make the point that as a Center, our CMC has provided many more services to the University community than originally conceived. Since I am sure that our CMC experience is not unique to our University, my plea is that we take advantage of opportunities to describe more accurately what we do and thereby increase our utility and attractiveness to a wider constituency. This change, in turn, will affect our decisions over staff, the training we provide to our potential intervention team, and how we are perceived and evaluated as a Center.

Perhaps programs such as ours might begin by selecting an organizational title that will cause observers to view us as a conflict resolution resource center that can provide a variety of assistance and services. Not only might this provide a more accurate description of our organizational mission, but also provide further appreciation of our utility to the campus community and more call for our services. With an organizational name that clearly describes us as a resource center offering a variety of conflict resolution services, we are more likely to be seen as a valuable resource by clients such as Deans of Student Affairs, Chancellors and Presidents, leaders of campus organizations, Directors of Human Resources, other administrative officers, as well as students, faculty and staff. These potential clients might very well ask

us to facilitate important and/or contentious meetings, conduct organizational audits, provide training workshops in conflict resolution skills, all valuable services congruent with the philosophy and skills of mediation, though quite different in practice from formal mediation. For instance, at Syracuse we have designed several strategic planning and budget information meetings for the Dean and faculty of one of our larger professional schools, and designed and facilitated action research/process consultation interventions for a variety of clients ranging from the Dean and faculty of another professional school to several of our major service units to academic support staff, and for one of the medical units. In addition we routinely conduct training sessions in communication skills, problem solving, facilitation, assertion, conflict resolution, negotiation and mediation for diverse units of the University.

Along with the increasing demand and opportunity for services comes the accompanying demand for the enhanced staffing and training of campus mediation centers. Many centers are staffed either by student volunteers, or by graduate students who are on some type of graduate assistantship. Many of these students have considerable experience and expertise in the field. However, as we contemplate providing a more varied and complex range of interventions, we might push for more involvement from professional staff who have a wider degree of experience and expertise with dispute resolution design and delivery, and have a professional, ongoing, contractual affiliation with the Institution which promotes responsibility and accountability.

Another important consequence of our more diverse and varied workload is the implication for training. Since we are expanding our range of services beyond mediation, the standard 20-40 hour mediation training will not suffice for our entire staff. One might begin with standard training on mediation and then branch out with training in other types of interventions as interest and time allows. My own preference is to begin with some generic training in conflict analysis and resolution, what is conflict, what are some habitual styles for handling conflict, and what are some specific skills to refine or develop if we are to work in more collaborative ways.

This theory and content piece would be followed with skill demonstration and practice with essential collaborative conflict resolution skills in reflective listening, matching and pacing, problem solving, assertion and negotiation. (I like to conduct training in these skills from the standpoint of the trainee as a primary disputant in conflict not as a third party neutral. My rationale for doing this is a belief that if one can access and use these skills as a disputant, then one can have a good chance of applying them effectively as a third party and will have a deeper appreciation for their impact on the participants and on the dispute itself.)

This generic training would then be followed by training in specific interventions such as mediation, conciliation, facilitation, team

building, action research/process consultation and workshops to train other potential members of the consultation staff.

The last implication for expanding campus conflict resolution services would be the necessity for creating new methods for evaluating the utility and effectiveness of our work. As long as campus centers continue to call themselves "mediation centers," people will continue to evaluate them by the number of formal mediations held and the number of agreements reached. However, this method of evaluation is contrary to the hoped for result of our conflict resolution training - to spread conflict resolution knowledge and skills so that others are better equipped to solve their own disputes without third party assistance. The formal recognition of our more varied role as intervenors and educators in dispute settlement will encourage us and our constituents to pay more attention to the many variables by which to assess the viability and success of conflict resolution centers. We will then need to develop and apply new, more sophisticated measures for assessing our impact and effectiveness.

In this article, I have argued for a more formal recognition of the expanded role in providing conflict resolution services that most campus centers either do fulfill, or potentially might fulfill. A name change from mediation center to something more comprehensive like conflict resolution resource center is more than semantic manipulation. The name change would give formal recognition of the expanded role, assist in providing more support and more business for the center, and obligate us to re-examine our current practices for staffing, training and evaluation. In doing so we will not only be taking advantage of opportunities for increased exposure and influence now available on our campuses but also assist in the continuing growth and development of the field.

Neil Katz is now an Emeritus Associate Professor in Public Affairs at Syracuse University. Neil was formerly director of the academic Program in Nonviolent Conflict and Change there. He served for many years as the faculty director of Syracuse University's Campus Mediation Center, and as Associate Director of the Hewlett-funded Program on the Analysis and Resolution of Conflicts.