

# CONFLICT MANAGEMENT IN HIGHER EDUCATION REPORT

Volume 1, Number 4, Nov/Dec 2000

## Collaboration and Conflict Resolution Skills: A Core Academic Competency?

by Bill Warters

Academic programs across the disciplines vary with respect to how explicit they make the core knowledge and skills graduates are required to master in order to receive their degree. In most programs, the essential knowledge requirements are established via a list of required courses that students must pass prior to graduation. It is assumed that the courses will cover the key material in an appropriate and hopefully consistent way and that students will learn and retain the essential content. Some degree programs go further and require a comprehensive or qualifying exam toward the end of the program that tests students cumulative knowledge and ability.

While many of us in the conflict resolution field are convinced of the broad utility of conflict resolution skills, it is not often that we see these skills being treated as core in other disciplines. Rarely do we see these skills being articulated with any specificity. In a refreshing exception to this, an innovative program at California State University Monterey Bay has incorporated conflict resolution as one of the program's 11 Major Learning Objectives that students must know and understand in order to graduate. The academic program, based at the [Institute for Community Collaborative Studies](http://iccs.monterey.edu/) (<http://iccs.monterey.edu/>), focuses on preparing students for careers in the field of **Health and Human Services**.

The program's belief is that collaboration is an essential aspect of success for workers in the modern health and human services delivery field. And the keys to collaboration include core competency in the broad area of conflict resolution, negotiation and mediation. The program's **Major Learning Objective (MLO)** in this area is articulated below.

### Conflict Resolution, Negotiation & Mediation

**Definition:** Understand the dynamics of human negotiation among conflicting interest groups and how to achieve mutual agreement.

### Core Competencies:

**Knowledge:** Demonstrate an understanding of the characteristics of conflict and how it manifests itself into interprofessional and organizational contexts.

**Skills:** Demonstrate the following collaborative problem solving skills:

- Active listening
- Formulate and express desired outcomes.
- Identify underlying interests
- Develop and analyze options

**Attitude:** Demonstrate knowledge of ethics of collaborative conflict resolution including:

- Neutrality
- Confidentiality
- Objectivity
- Respect for differences
- Honesty

## **Supporting Competencies:**

### **Knowledge:**

- Ability to understand the psycho-physiological and behavioral aspects of conflict.
- Ability to understand cross-cultural considerations in dealing with conflict.
- Ability to understand the "casualties" of conflict, i.e., loss of morale, productivity, etc.
- Ability to understand the prevalent conflict management styles and strategies
- Ability to understand the positive opportunities that can be presented by conflict.
- Ability to understand the basic motivational theories.
- Ability to understand the basic theories of individual and organizational power dynamics, i.e., the imbalance of power and impact on parties.
- Ability to identify personality and conflict management styles, strengths and challenges.
- Ability to understand the conflict cycle, i.e., how it begins and escalates.
- Ability to understand "positional vs. principled" negotiating concepts and demonstrate the appropriate skills.
- Ability to understand the differences between the roles, responsibilities, process and expected outcomes of mediation, arbitration and negotiation.

- Ability to understand the differences between compromise, cooperation, collaboration, and consensus building.

### **Skills:**

- Ability to assess and manage interpersonal conflict in the professional realm.
- Ability to listen actively to facilitate understanding and prevent conflict.
- Ability to understand the use of both open and closed questions.
- Ability to demonstrate and identify different courses of action and analyzing the consequences of each (e.g. actual and hidden costs and risks).
- Ability to identify the elements of a sustainable agreement.

### **Attitudes:**

Ability to demonstrate knowledge of the basic negotiation rules of ethics and principles of practice including:

- respect of all participating parties,
- professional accountability,
- freedom from bias (objectivity)
- tolerance of different people and perspectives,
- importance of honesty (long term personal credibility and trust),
- not using self-defensiveness as a tactic in negotiation,
- ability to hold confidence (confidentiality),
- and ability not to personalize the process

Another example, this time in the **Education field**, is provided by the [Master of Arts in Education Program](http://www.sl.edu/graded/default.htm) (<http://www.sl.edu/graded/default.htm>) at Silver Lake College in Manitowoc, Wisconsin. The college offers a competency based graduate study program for teachers who wish to become administrative leaders in Wisconsin schools. The program leads to a Master of Arts in Education degree and to Wisconsin Administrative licenses. Conflict Resolution is one of ten core competencies that students must master, for instance, in order to qualify for the School Management Wisconsin Administrative Certificate. The competency is articulated this way:

#### **A. Definition of Terms:**

For the purpose of this competency, **conflict resolution** is defined as the processes by which the system handles and resolves conflicts within

the system, and between the system and the community.

**B.1. Issues to Be Addressed:**

1. The legal process as a means of conflict resolution (school board, administrative staff; teachers, students, community);
2. Contract negotiations as a means of conflict resolution;
3. Problem-solving models as a means of conflict resolution;
4. Human relations models as a means of conflict resolution;
5. Ethical concerns in conflict resolution

**B.2. Optional Issues:**

1. Conflicts between professional staff and the bureaucratic system;
2. Inter-group conflicts in the school environment;
3. Individual conflicts: personality/role; role/role

**C. Examples of Competency Demonstration Activities**

Demonstrate the knowledge, understanding, and application of skills necessary to execute the following:

1. Review existing and/or develop a Student Policy Handbook consistent with contemporary statutory and case law;
2. Review existing and/or develop a Staff Code of Conduct consistent with contemporary statutory and case law;
3. Develop a Student Conflict Resolution program;
4. Develop a plan for non-adversarial contract negotiations;
5. Perform a self-analysis regarding the handling of conflict;
6. Develop a model for resolving conflicts between school and community and/or competing groups within the school setting.

While appealing, such examples of expressly stated academic competencies in conflict resolution remain few and far between. Few programs seem to write down and then attempt to measure students conflict resolution skill abilities (not a simple thing to do...).

Perhaps competency requirements like those above will never be seen as an essential part of mainstream academic training unless we begin to advocate for them. But if we do, an infusion approach might well impact on the growing crop of free-standing Conflict Resolution degree programs. This could be a positive thing, or not. I don't have the answer, but I think the questions are worth exploring.