

CONFLICT MANAGEMENT IN HIGHER EDUCATION REPORT

Volume 2, Number 2, Feb 2002

10 Challenges Facing Campus Mediation Programs

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As of October 19th, 2000, there were roughly 218 distinct campus mediation programs with an additional 175 programs being connected to the university's Ombudsman office (Wayne State). Mediation is quickly growing as an alternative means of resolution on college campuses to resolve a wide variety of issues: money disputes, roommate issues, group academic work, and relationship issues to name a few. These programs are also being used for education and getting new students involved with and practicing in the field of mediation. Whether as a means of resolving a dispute, or as a part of an education, campus mediation programs are growing everywhere.

This list was developed by pulling together the common threads amongst all programs interviewed and by extrapolating examples to look at the larger issues facing these programs. After examining the interviews it became clear that the issues facing these programs went beyond the four areas originally introduced, but that these areas still were very much involved in the development of these programs. The ten challenges to campus mediation programs are:

1. Getting students to agree to go to mediation
2. Providing enough training time
3. Needing a full-time staff and a consistent philosophy
4. Finding new ways to publicize services to students
5. Establishing and educating a network of referral sources
6. Support from university administration in the development of a mediation program
7. Association with other campus departments
8. Developing new programs to reach and educate students
9. Exchanging knowledge between all campus mediation programs
10. Changing the opinion of mediation within the public at large

Getting Students to go to Mediation

The main challenge is that many times a number of cases will come into the campus mediation office however for one reason or another the case never goes onto mediation. Students not going to mediation conflicts with the very purpose of the program, and also many campus mediation programs are being judged on their effectiveness based upon their caseload. Therefore, a lack of mediations is a potential reason for university administration to cancel the program altogether. There are many ways that have helped move students to mediation. These include pointing out a student's vested interest in the relationship, educating them about the process, and addressing the respondent's needs. In particular, one interviewee mentioned that they watch their phrasing when talking to the second party for the first time and they emphasize their desire to 'help both parties reach their goals'. Other methods included reality testing about court procedures, providing shuttle or phone mediations, settling the dispute at the intake level, or providing consultation to one party.

Providing Enough Training Time

Campus mediation programs need to have a well-trained mediator pool whether they are using on staff and faculty or if it is a peer mediation program. In some cases there are state requirements of as much as forty hours for mediators. Other times it is as simple as not being able to get all the people together at the same time because of busy schedules. Offering credit and no-credit classes, getting students involved in the campus mediation program through other outreach activities, developing group cohesion through outside work, and certifying students as trained mediators were all mentioned as ways to overcome the difficulties of training. Additionally, some resolutions were offering an eight-week class in addition to a weekend training session, an advanced training class, and having students meet in small groups every week to do role-plays. Essentially the goal of training has developed beyond just learning the skills and process of mediation. The trend has moved towards letting trainees be heavily involved in the process making it their own and developing a personal stake in their training.

Needing a Full-time Staff and a Consistent Philosophy

While it is clear that many mediation programs are not distinct campus units, there is a clear need for a full-time staff member to coordinate the services, train, and provide a consistent framework for development. By continually changing hands or not having a dedicated staff the development of the program becomes stunted. Different people learn, practice, and teach mediation in different ways and because of this one director might choose one avenue one year, and the next year it deteriorates because a new director pursues an alternate direction. Also, this constant changing of the guard prevents

the mediation program from developing a reputation and trust within the university. Referral sources may not know whom to contact, what that person's qualifications are, or have ever met them thus decreasing the chance for a referral. In addition, lacking a full-time staff member creates training deficits. These deficits are a result of not customizing the training to the specific needs of a changing program. Group cohesion is never formed through this process making it unlikely people will take a personal stake in the program, referrals, or desire to be involved in outreach programs.

Finding New Ways to Publicize Services to Students

The purpose of publicity is twofold: reaching students prior to a conflict, and be evident to reach a student in conflict. There are many different ways to publicize such as having people in class being required to twice a week distribute posters on campus, short presentations in classes, being involved in health and housing fairs, student television, student newspaper ads, conflict resolution workshops, advertising mediation training, residence hall floor educators, door hangers for residence hall advisors, advertising during movie theater previews, email lists, and talking to landlords. It is important to note here that interviewees stressed meeting face to face with the individuals because it helped to develop a sense of trust and answer any questions they might have.

Establishing and Educating a Network of Referral Sources

Referral sources are vital to any campus mediation program. While publicity aims at drawing people into the office a variety of factors, including lack of knowledge of process, might deter people from just walking in and requesting mediation. Referral sources are generally thought of as the people or offices that people in conflict would turn to discuss the situation in the midst of a conflict. For this reason, referral sources are vital to a campus mediation program because they provide the people that are in most need of the service. Yet for a variety of reasons potential referral sources do not refer. A list of reasons for this might include not knowing about the service, misunderstanding the process, or trying to resolve the conflict on their own. Two avenues to increase referrals have been targeting specific campus divisions that could benefit from being involved with mediation and educating referral sources by meeting with them personally. Specific campus locations include student legal services, resident advisors, landlords, off-campus housing office, judicial services, ombudsman office, counselors, university police, public policy office, business department, communications department, and education department. One interviewee also mentioned that they receive quite a few referrals from their peer mediators.

Support from University Admin. in Program Development

Campus mediation programs are springing up everywhere and universities are looking for these programs to make an impact. The most common way of assessing the development of a mediation program is looking at the caseload, and as long as the case numbers go up then the program is safe for another year. Problems that continue to show up are a lack of funding that either prevents publicity or a full-time staff, focus only on the numbers of cases without looking at the impact other programs are making, and support that must be renewed yearly. The biggest way to combat these difficulties seems to be ways to show all the services being used and shifting the focus away from only caseload. One such method is keeping track of all evaluation forms of mediation presentations.

Association with other Campus Departments

Another point that seems clear is that while mediation programs can be independent of other offices, they are in fact more effective when they are allied with another office on campus. By allying with offices that receive student complaints and conflict situations, campus mediation programs are better able to receive referrals and become a visible alternative on campus. Most commonly the offices seen affiliated with a campus mediation program are judicial affairs, ombudsman office, and student legal services. Clearly when working with these offices, they are more likely to refer to mediation when the situation better fits mediation than the service they provide. For instance, an attorney that represents all students on campus cannot handle a conflict between two students so instead of recommending other attorneys they will instead refer to mediation. By working with judicial affairs programs similar to victim offender reconciliation are showing up. Cases that are deemed appropriate for mediation are referred to mediation either in conjunction with a hearing or a lesser penalty is issued if the party agrees to go to mediation.

Developing New Programs to Reach and Educate Students

More programs are being developed that reach out to students so that mediation practices are being applied in new ways to students' lives. This allows for students to see how mediation can benefit them in an everyday situation not just when they are in the midst of a conflict. One such program is called the Team Action Plan (TAP). This program is being used to have students working on group projects meet at the beginning of a semester to proactively deal with any potential conflicts, talk about their expectations, and develop a plan for if they run into conflict later on. The interviewee went on to say that professors have noticed that groups who go through a TAP are

doing grade-wise better than others groups, and are enjoying working in a group more than other groups. It is a proactive directed process, facilitative, and has an option for mediation. This program has greatly impacted referrals and mediation use. New programs create the opportunity of finding new ways to apply mediation practices to students' lives, increasing the use of the office, educating students to the mediation process, and finding new ways to report that effectiveness to university administration.

Exchanging Knowledge Between all Campus Mediation Programs

A major area of future exploration that will yield in more effective mediation practices will be the communication of ideas amongst all campus mediation programs. For example, one interviewee mentioned that they are currently doing research on what skills directly affect the outcome of mediation. This type of information without a doubt needs to be spread throughout the community to enhance effectiveness.

Changing the Opinion of Mediation within the Public at Large

One interviewee specifically stated that the biggest challenge facing mediation programs was an 'opinion changing challenge'. This change in opinion needs to force people to understand the mediation process that the parties are in charge of decision making, that mediation is a viable alternative, and increasing general knowledge of the service. Continuing to provide outreach services such as workshops allows campus mediation programs to educate the student body to the exact nature of a mediation so that misconceived notions can be alleviated. Part of the opinion changing challenge is also one of changing the way people view and approach conflict. Academic programs are also another avenue of educating and increasing the public's knowledge of the mediation process.

Summary and Conclusion

Based upon interviews conducted with other university campus mediation programs it was the goal of this study to examine in depth the role and challenges facing mediation programs on college campuses. The initial focus on intakes, training, publicity, and referral sources led to a larger understanding of the challenges facing campus mediation programs. The ten challenges listed are not a comprehensive list, but are meant to be an introduction into the major challenges facing mediation programs, and to offer some solutions that have been put into practice. One of the remaining dilemmas with referral sources is determining when they should handle a case personally and when they should refer the case. Measuring informal usage of recently trained mediators is also another challenge facing

mediation programs and needs to be addressed. There also needs to be more research examining the exact nature of public view on conflict and on the process of mediation to understand more ways to approach this challenge. Future studies need to also include larger samples of campus mediation programs, and the development of a more standardized interview process.

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