

CONFLICT MANAGEMENT IN HIGHER EDUCATION REPORT

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An Application of the Transactional View: A Unique Role for Ombudsmen in Campus Protest

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The person-environment relationship from a transactional point of view is more than spatial. It is more than the person being situated in the environment ("in the way ships are in bottles" Tibbetts and Esser, 1973). The person-environment relationship is a transactional one where person and environment are mutually defining and redefining.

Important to this transactional relationship is the influence of assumptions and intentional factors on perception. Hastorf and Cantril's (1954) classic case study entitled "They Saw a Game: A Case Study" illustrates this point. Tibbetts and Esser (1973) give the following summary:

"The 'Case Study' deals with a football game between two traditional rivals, Dartmouth and Princeton, and the extent to which school affiliation biased what a student perceived. As might be expected, there were no 'impartial observers'; students from the two schools literally saw different occurrences on the playing field. When films of the game were later shown, students from the two schools could not in fact even agree as to when there were infractions of the rules, ..." page 445

The authors summarize by quoting Hastorf and Cantril: "The significance assumed by different happenings for different people depend in large part on the purpose people bring to the occasion and the assumptions they have of the purpose and probable behavior of other people involved". The practical application of this transactional view is embodied in the observer program at the University of Colorado in Boulder .

The Observer Program

Two years ago (i.e. in 1987) the Ombudsman Office at the University of Colorado created an observer program for the Boulder campus. The observer program idea originated at the University of California-Berkeley many years ago during an era when student protest was common. The program uses volunteers, trained in neutral observation, to enter a crowd of protesters and make written observations of "critical incidents." A critical incident is defined as a situation where there is potential damage to person or property. The impetus for the observer program at the University of Colorado came from the police department after several of the key personnel from the

department consulted with the campus police department at the University of California Berkeley.

One of the unique values of the observer program is that it provides protection for all groups involved in protest activities who "need to know." Such groups might include: student protesters, community protesters, police officers, media personnel, administrators, counterprotesters, and those that the protesters may be directing their actions towards (campus recruiters, regents, administrators, student political groups, etc.). Although police may photograph or videotape incidents for use in prosecution, media may capture the flavor of the protest, and administrators may observe an overall demonstration, the written observations offer detailed up-close observation. These reports have come to represent a truly neutral perspective of what may have happened between conflicting parties.

Role of Ombudsman Office

The Director of the Ombudsman Office coordinates the observer program. Coordination involves selection and training of volunteer observers, negotiating with administrators and police around the need for observers, contacting observers to request their presence at an event, supervising observers during their work, providing refreshments, briefing observers before an event, discussing with police and other campus officials observer access to the vicinity of the event and holding rooms in the case of arrests, providing appropriate identification for observers so they may cross police lines and enter other secured environments, receiving and responding to requests for observer reports, responding to media inquiries. The Ombudsman Office staff does not serve as actual observers. *(2003 Editor's note: the Ombuds office at UC Boulder no longer manages the report documents or the media contacts, these are handled by a senior Student Affairs administrator with ombuds training.)*

Role and Training of Observers

Observers are selected from staff on campus. Staff were chosen as opposed to students and faculty because of the flexibility in their schedules which students and faculty lack. Types of people from the staff ranks who have served as observers include: assistant to the vice chancellor, assistant director of admissions, director of academic media, bursar, director of the student health center, director of risk management, tuition classification officer, personnel specialist, recreation center coordinator, accountant. Observers are given release time, similar to serving on a committee, from their routine work. They are often called at the last minute (since many protests are unannounced). They are required to meet at a certain location, listen to a short briefing, and observe. Some situations may be peaceful and therefore uneventful and others may require several hours of intensive work. Observer reports are turned in shortly after the event.

Observers are trained once or twice a year. Training is provided by the Ombudsman Office with guest presenters from the media relations department and campus police department. Training topics include: overview of civil disobedience, police tactics, interacting with the press, neutral observation skills, report writing, and observer program mechanics.

Observer Program Policies

Observers are required to use only paper and pen when making observations. Recording devices and cameras are forbidden due to safety reasons. Special identification tags have been created by the campus police department for observers' use during demonstrations. The coordinator of the observer program works closely with the police department to ensure the safety of the observers. Observers are allowed access to any place that protesters and police are unless it is deemed unsafe by the police. Observers are for the most part silent. They do not engage in discussion with either police or protesters except to properly identify themselves and to answer questions about the observer program.

Access to Reports

To enhance the integrity of the observer program, requests for reports are submitted, in writing, to the administrator managing them. The person requesting the report(s) must demonstrate a "need to know" and specify the time and location of the incident in question. For example, if a grievance has been filed against a police officer for excess force and the incident occurred on Monday afternoon at 3:00, near-the fountain outside x building, the request should specify that all observer reports around this time and location be provided. The definition of "need to know" is broad and can apply to students, staff, faculty, police officers, and community members. Reports are kept in a confidential file.

Use of the Observer Program

While the observer program was initially created to serve potentially volatile campus demonstrations (CIA recruiting on campus, divestment in South Africa) the concept has creatively been used in other ways. Observers were asked to walk lines during a recent registration disaster where students were waiting up to 10-12 hours to drop and add classes. Observers recently watched a crowd of 3,000 which was listening to Jesse Jackson and other political speakers. The program has gained the respect of the University community and will continue as a group of well trained staff who can quickly provide a neutral perspective when needed on campus.

References:

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Tibbetts, P. & Esser, A. (1973). Transactional structures in man-environment relations. *Man-Environment Systems*, 3(6), 441-468.

Editor's note: Susan Hobson-Panico has just completed her Ph.D. in Education and Human Resource Studies. She served as the Ombudsman for the University of Colorado at Boulder at the time this piece was written. She has 24 years experience as a college ombudsman and administrator.