

THE CAMPUS AS COMMUNITY

by Linda Stamato

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The American college campus is suffering from a malaise and alienation common to contemporary society. Shared experience, mutuality, common understandings and a sense of obligation, elements believed to have characterized American campuses at an earlier age, are far less apparent today. Indeed, two years ago, the main concern of college presidents, according to ACE's Educational Record, was how to build "a stronger overall sense of community" on campus.

Campus life has become a matter of public attention; rarely does a week pass, for example, without some mention in the press of an incident involving racial intolerance or physical or verbal abuse. Over the last three years, incidents of intergroup conflict have reportedly occurred on 175 college campuses. Public support for institutions of higher learning is not unconditional; it relies on certain expectations with respect to performance to be sure, but also looks for the expression of certain values, say, civility, tolerance, and respect for differences, among others. Too often the current picture falls short.

Colleges are expected to be and, for the most part, I think, would assert themselves to be, premier institutions of civil society. Accordingly, they should be demonstrating how differences can be managed effectively, how common ground can be achieved, and how society can realize the goal of inclusion, an essential element of the democratic ideal. Three areas, at least, deserve attention in this regard: curricula; campus life; and governance.

CURRICULA

A significant social trend toward non-adversarial means of resolving disputes is taking place in the United States; college campuses are only beginning to catch up with it. A few institutions offer students professional preparation that incorporates the theory and practice of negotiation and conflict resolution and serious, interdisciplinary study is increasing. But efforts to link theory, research and policy are still in a nascent state despite the urgency for training scholars and activists to cope with the increasing complexities of a new world order at home and abroad, to offer non-violent models for cooperative problem solving and to manage conflict on a variety of levels.

The interdependence that increasingly defines global society demands an unprecedented degree of cooperation involving all levels of government and society. As such it will entail extensive negotiations to produce economic, political and social structures reflective of the needs of the era, including many differences that arise from inequities between and within nations as well as the conflicts, submerged in cold war times, that are already emerging along regional, ethnic, class, race and substantive e.g. environmental lines.

This shift is significant domestically as well: Law, social work, management and the professions

that cover the public policy field (planners for example) increasingly require research, policy and practical guidance in negotiation and conflict resolution. Here too, collaborative problem-solving and creative dispute resolution can offer a great deal.

Equally important are efforts to prepare students to manage conflict apart from career aspirations. Various projects designed to promote citizenship, to provide community service or to develop leadership, several campuses, including those at Rutgers, are undertaking efforts to merge education in civic responsibility with traditional liberal arts curricula.

CAMPUS LIFE

One effect of the protests of the 1960's and 1970's was to make institutions sensitive to the rights of students. Disciplinary procedures became increasingly formal; concerned with due process and rules, they shaped themselves more and more after the courts in an effort to protect both the institution and the individual. As a result, some of the same problems associated with the courts are found on many college campuses: First, defining disputes to fit within categories of offenses can leave real issues submerged and ignored. Secondly, since results will often be judgments with sanctions imposed, complainants who must maintain social or academic relationships with offending parties may be reluctant to inform anyone of the problem, to testify, or to provide evidence. And, thirdly, there is incentive to manipulate the rules to win instead of to examine a situation so as to understand responsibilities, fairness, and concerns from different perspectives. The potential educational value of resolving a conflict, inevitably, is lost.

Mediation—voluntary assisted negotiation by a third-party—can offer colleges and universities an alternative to formal legalistic procedures. Presently, there are over twenty-five campuses providing mediation for a wide variety of conflicts involving students, staff, faculty, and community residents, either by incorporating it into the disciplinary code as a first or optional step, by using it to handle all disputes in certain categories, or by offering mediation to all members of the campus and the surrounding community.

The University of Maryland, for example, along with the City of College Park, established a mediation center on the recommendation of its, appropriately named, “Civility Commission”. For the last six years, on-campus disputes as well as those involving the campus with the surrounding communities have been directed to this center. At Syracuse University, a similar center, the product of faculty, student, and administration initiative, not only provides members of the campus community with a means to resolve interpersonal disputes, but gives graduate and undergraduate students an opportunity to explore the practical application of conflict resolution theory. Now in its fourth year, the Syracuse center offers workshops in addition to traditional modes of instruction; it also facilitates “town” meetings on campus issues.

These follow earlier efforts at the secondary school level to provide for the mediation of disputes that here, too, enable young people to assume responsibility for dealing with conflicts, supplementing (and in some cases supplanting) formal school discipline. A good deal of experience now suggests that mediation training, and exposure to problem-solving approaches at this level, has a number of important indirect benefits beyond the decline in violence, harassment and other abuses. Among them are higher student retention rates and improved academic

performance.

Conflict is natural, acceptable and essential, at times, to progress, but a civil society must offer constructive avenues for its expression. Mediation provides a context to keep conflict from becoming destructive. Mediation offers educators a model for promoting individuals' capacities and responsibilities for making decisions about their lives; for fostering mutual respect and cooperation; and for developing the use of fairness rather than power as a basis for resolving disputes. These are skills people need to address the complexity of individual and collective life. And, engaging in this kind of service involvement in the life of the campus not only serves to benefit the individual and that community directly but, as seems likely, students will stay engaged in their communities once they have graduated and thus contribute to the civic health of society.

GOVERNANCE

A third area, broadly-labeled governance, has to do with approaching decision-making and conflict resolution in a less adversarial and confrontational manner and engaging in what David Matthews, the President of the Kettering Foundation, calls "deliberative talk," which I take to mean discourse rather than debate, the kind of talk that leads to identifying interests, evaluating options and building on common ground. This requires creating the means, i.e., skills and forums, for the community to talk, deliberatively, about issues, about the purpose, direction, organization and quality of education and campus life.

A major barrier to achieving satisfactory public life is the very limited set of responses we have to conflict. Higher education is no different from the culture surrounding it in this regard. Contentiousness pervades the culture: individuals and spokes people for groups argue over every imaginable issue, positions become polarized and the majority tries to look the other way. Most problems are complex and interrelated, however, and solutions are unlikely to emerge by advocating in outmoded frameworks, from fixed and narrow positions, or by trying to avoid conflict altogether.

From research on procedural justice (Lind, E.A. and Tyler, T.R., The Social Psychology of Procedural Justice. New York: Plenum, 1988; Merry, S. and Silbey, S. "What Do Plaintiffs Want? Reexamining the Concept of Dispute." Justice System Journal 9: 151-179, 1984) we learn that, more than winning or losing, what is important to parties is constructive participation in a process for resolving the dispute. Involvement, and some measure of control, deepens a sense of ownership, not only of the process, but, eventually, of the solution as well.

Participatory, collaborative decision-making processes are needed that allow parties who see different aspects of a problem to explore those differences and search for solutions that go beyond their own limited vision of what is possible, to surrender some degree of, let's call it sovereignty, in order to create a richer, more comprehensive appreciation of a problem among those at interest than any one of them could construct alone. (Gray, B., Collaborating: Finding Common Ground for Multiparty Problems, Jossey-Bass, 1989).

As has been noted time and again, because democracies tend toward disharmony, they require

processes, forums, techniques and organizations to assist the search for social cohesion. As I see it, college campuses would be more likely to achieve “community” if they relied more on interest-based negotiation and those processes for managing differences, principally mediation, that attempt to identify shared interests and to establish common ground, processes that respect differences but are capable of action. Colleges need to strengthen their civic infrastructure, build problem-solving capacity, and breathe new life into the campus as community.

STARTING A CAMPUS MEDIATION PROGRAM: THE SYRACUSE UNIVERSITY CAMPUS MEDIATION CENTER

(The following selections are drawn from an account by Bill Waters, who helped to establish the Campus Mediation Center at Syracuse University. He discusses how the Center began back in 1989, and some of the objectives it hopes to achieve.)

The Syracuse Center handles conflicts of an interpersonal nature between two or more people in an interdependent living or working situation. It is open to cases involving students, staff or faculty, as well as off-campus individuals or groups if they happen to be in conflict with a member of the campus community.

The Center is the product of a joint effort that brought faculty, students, and administrative staff together to work collaboratively toward a common goal. This diversity resulted in funding coming from five campus sources. The Center officially opened for business February 1, 1989.

The main purpose of the Center is to provide members of the University community direct assistance in creatively and nonviolently resolving their interpersonal disputes. Other program goals include the development of cross-disciplinary and cross-program alliances, and conflict resolution education. 'Bat education involves a clinic for students and staff interested in gaining actual experience with dispute resolution techniques, and training and outreach presentations for the community as a whole.

In its first semester the Center handled 17 cases, with eight of these involving formal mediation. Cases included a workplace conflict, a case involving international students, a harassment case that was co-mediated with a downtown mediation center, a property separation case, and a case involving a student and resident advisor.

The referral sources varied as well, with cases coming through Student Life (the judicial system), the Employee Assistance Program, Residence Hall staff, the Office of International Services, student apartments, and by word of mouth.

THE MEDIATORS

The Center uses a co-mediator model, typically pairing highly experienced mediators with those with less experience. This model permits enhanced quality control, increased feedback to mediators on their techniques, modeling of teamwork to the disputants and mirroring of the diversity that may occur among disputants. The mediators all trained either through the annual Summer Institute in Creative Conflict Management at Syracuse University or other mediation programs. A ten hour refresher training was used to develop shared group norms among the program's mediators and to give volunteers not familiar with mediation a chance to practice and develop teamwork strategies. The mediators come from a broad range of age and backgrounds. Included are undergraduate and graduate students, faculty and staff.

CONCLUSION

Mediation programs at campuses can transform conflict and disciplinary cases into an educational experience that can provide students with new skills for use in future conflicts and can subtly change the atmosphere on campus toward one that respects diversity, cooperation, and future-oriented problem-solving.

If you are interested in more information about the Syracuse Center, visit their Web site:

<http://www.maxwell.syr.edu/parc/cmc.htm>