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Problems and Promise

By Douglas Yarn

“The long-term success of conflict resolution education (CRE) and dispute resolution programs in higher education may depend on transforming these institutions so that they actually model constructive conflict management” (Yarn, 2007, p. 22)

Douglas Yarn (2007), Executive Director of the Consortium on Negotiation and Conflict Resolution and Professor of Law at Georgia State University College of Law, deconstructs both the inherent problems and the inaugurating promises of institutionalizing conflict management in higher education.

Problems

In essence, Yarn (2007) argues the problems with institutionalizing conflict management in higher education stems from the reality that “The university often seems to be the very antithesis of a collaborative institution” (p. 22). The contributing factors to this troubling reality include:

- The typical faculty member has limited conflict resolution skills, works mostly in isolation, and is socialized to be critical of others.
- Universities are predominantly composed of constituencies often with conflicting objectives.
- The combinations of the stereotypical faculty and the nature of institutions themselves create inertia and make it difficult to resolve internal conflict.

Promise

Ultimately, Yarn (2007) argues that the long-term success of conflict resolution education (CRE) and dispute resolution programs depend on transforming these institutions so that they actually model constructive conflict management. Based on the transformative examples of 35 public institutions of higher education in Georgia under an initiative of the state Board of Regents since the mid-1990s, Yarn identifies several promising outcomes of institutionalizing conflict management in higher education.

- The Georgia initiative with the technical support of the Consortium on Negotiation and Conflict Resolution (CNCR) has significantly reduced the number of grievances and has prevented numerous disputes from ending in costly litigation.
- Through better habits of conflict handling, the Georgia initiative has encouraged broader cultural change (e.g., interdepartmental cooperation and communication; modeling collaborative and constructive conflict resolution for students).
- Institutionalizing conflict management promises that universities modeling collaboration will be successful in building and maintaining its own community.
- Institutionalizing conflict management can further promise that the transformed university will be proactively engaged in external community-building.

(Summary prepared by Yea-Wen Chen, FDR Graduate Assistant)