CONFLICT MANAGEMENT IN HIGHER EDUCATION REPORT

Volume 3, Number 1, Oct 2002

Researching Campus Conflict Management Culture(s): A Role For Ombuds?

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This piece, written in 1995, was originally published in the UCI Ombudsman: The Journal. *While dated, the issues it addresses are still relevant today.*

Ombuds as Researchers?

The late Jim Laue, one of the conflict resolution community's most beloved practitioners and theorists, described a range of roles that conflict intervenors may play in any given dispute. The primary roles Laue (1978) identifies include those of activist, advocate, mediator, researcher, and/or rule enforcer. Each of these roles entails a different relationship to the parties involved in the conflict, and a different stance regarding the desirable conflict intervention process and outcomes. Discussions and written materials on college and university ombuds most often describe the ombuds as filling either the mediator, or perhaps less commonly, the advocate role, and tend to downplay or make invisible the researcher role, except as it manifests itself as fact-finding prior to engaging in other problem solving efforts.

My assumption is that ombuds practitioners don't often think of or describe themselves or their colleagues as researchers (in the more traditional academic sense) because this concept is potentially threatening to people who are counting on the confidentiality of the office and who fear exposure when research is shared with others. While good research preserves confidentiality when necessary, this reluctance is understandable given the type of sensitive cases ombuds often deal with. Ombuds may also be hesitant to define themselves as researchers due to concerns about clearly differentiating their role from that of members of the faculty, who typically see research as their domain. Finally, ombuds may not emphasize research simply due to time constraints created by the demands of managing all the other activities usually associated with an ombuds office.

For whatever reasons, I would argue that ombuds are not commonly thought of as researchers, and they do not picture themselves in this role. However, as the very existence of the ombuds journal suggests, ombuds are actively observing, reflecting on, theorizing about, and

writing up their work, and appropriately sharing these ideas with colleagues. My purpose in this article is to briefly explore a somewhat expanded role set for the ombuds, one that includes the ombuds as researcher, a role that I think has tremendous potential value.

Building on the notion of "reflective practice" as discussed by Schon (1983) and Wallace (1994), I would like to suggest that we work on developing collaborative projects that bring together faculty in the field of conflict resolution with campus ombuds practitioners, wherein in the ombuds assist the faculty researchers in exploring some specific aspects of campus life and culture, and the researchers assist the ombuds in reflecting on their practice and refining their knowledge of their working environment.

This idea for more collaboration between ombuds and researchers is inspired in part by my current *(now former)* position as chair of the Higher Education Committee of the National Association for Mediation in Education (NAME). In this role, I interact with a wide range of campus conflict intervenors, and also with faculty and staff from the growing number of academic programs in dispute resolution. Recently I have become interested in exploring ways that these two groups can do more to support and learn from each other, since they share much in common, and bring unique strengths and perspectives that complement one another.

Why Study Campus Culture(s)?

While colleges as institutions are influenced by powerful external factors such as demographic shifts, economic changes, and political realignments, they are also shaped by strong internal forces. More and more, researchers and practitioners are looking at the social environments existing within organizations for clues for better understanding and improving their functioning. In a 1985 review of contemporary organizational studies, Ouchi and Wilkins stated that: "The study of organizational culture has become one of the major domains of organizational research, and some might even argue that it has become the single most active arena, eclipsing studies of formal structure, or organization-environment research, and of bureaucracy." (Ouchi, 1985, p. 458)

While the study of organizational culture (and a related concept known as climate) has become quite common in organizational research on businesses, there remains a relative lack of organizational culture research on higher education, especially as it relates to conflict and conflict management. A collaboration between ombuds and organizational researchers could help fill this gap.

Culture is important because it structures the way people perceive situations, and it effects the range of choices they consider when

approaching conflict. Culture also tends to be somewhat invisible and taken for granted, so we may not recognize its influence until we have transgressed certain codes or conventions and have experienced negative outcomes as a result. Higher education researcher William Tierney (Tierney, 1988a) uses an interesting methaphor to discuss this issue. When asked for his advice on acting, Spencer Tracy once remarked, "Just know your lines and don't bump into the furniture." However, as Tierney correctly points out, "On the stage of organizational culture, such advice is wholly inadequate. Participants within collegiate cultures have few if any written scripts prepared by an author to go by. And as for the furniture, the most visible props--role and governance arrangements--are not the ones we tend to bump into. Rather, we most often trip over perceptions and attitudes, the intangibles that escape our attention even as they make up the fabric of daily organizational life." (Tierney, 1988a, p. 2)

The Research Approach

Anthropologist Clifford Geertz explains that, "Man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun. I take culture to be those webs, and the analysis of it to be therefore not an experimental science in search of law, but an interpretive one in search of meaning." (Geertz, 1973, p. 5)

Following Geertz, given the subtleties of campus life, and the necessarily interpretive approach needed to study culture, I will advocate here for an ethnographic and qualitative approach to research that uses techniques developed by sociologists and anthropologists for studying people's "lived experience.,, According to Tierney, "An analysis of the organizational culture of a college or university must occur as if the institution were an interconnected web that cannot be understood unless one looks not only at the structure and natural laws of that web, but also at actors' interpretations of the web itself." (Tierney, 1988b, p. 4) This reality requires researchers to use techniques that get at people's perceptions and ways of making sense out of their interactions with others.

I suggest here that the ombuds is in a unique position to serve as a guide or "primary informant" (kind of like the character "Doc" in william F. Whyte's 1943 classic ethnography Street Corner Society) to researchers interested in campus organizational culture and subculture, especially as it relates to conflict-related behaviors and beliefs. Given their placement in the organizational structure and their function as problem investigators, interpreters or translators of policy, and referral sources, ombuds are in an unparalleled position to observe and understand organizational life in many different campus domains. Chaney and Hurst (Chaney, 1980) and Robbins and Deane (Robbins, 1987) both note the special position ombudsman programs

occupy as environmental sensors. Chaney and Hurst write that "ombuds programs are in a unique position as one of the most revealing unobtrusive measures of stressors in the campus community, " and Robbins and Deane conclude that "Data supplied to managers is normally filtered and condensed; not only is the process imperfect but information may be distorted for the purposes of influencing decisions. The ombuds receives unfiltered raw data from all levels and locations in the organization and does not have management responsibility. In our opinion, the potential usefulness of ombuds to an 'early warning system' has been under-utilized..."

Focus on Campus Subcultures, Not University-wide Culture

It has long been noted that colleges and universities contain quite a range of relatively strong subcultures that are based on groupings marked by differences in age, ethnicity, discipline, work responsibilities, social affiliations, and organizational location. I would suggest that, rather than primarily focusing on case studies of conflict (which we all know can be quite instructive), or working to further document the basic activities of the ombuds office (a seemingly popular thesis topic in the early years when ombudsing was still somewhat "exotic"), we focus instead on developing greater understanding of the various subcultures on campus and how these groups manage conflict within their own networks and with others who fall outside their primary identity group. A few interesting examples along these lines (there aren't many yet) include Kay Harman's (Harman, 1989) examination of conflicts arising from tensions between professional versus academic values in professional schools, and Jim Schnell's (Schnell, 1985) look at conflict resolution within a greek letter organization.

Ombuds can provide a valuable window on the way conflicts get played out within universities, as well as a vantage point for exploring how the introduction of various dispute resolution services may in fact effect an organizational climate and culture over time. While I am not arguing that ombuds can ever truly know these various subcultures, they are certainly in a good position to explore what they do know, and then introduce the researcher to the right cultural informants to help them find out more.

Existing Research

There is already a small but growing base of general campus culture research that we might draw on as we develop our questions and approaches. A good summary of this work can be found in Tierney's

(Tierney, 1988b) and Peterson and Spencer's (Peterson, 1991) reviews of this area of study. As they point out, the earliest work (in the 1960's) focused largely on the study of student cultures, and then in the 1970's, on distinctive colleges as cultures, the role of belief and loyalty in college organizations, and function of organizational sagas. more recent work has focused on the study of various academic cultures, leadership in different cultural settings, and the system of higher education itself as a culture.

It appears that interest in organizational culture on campus continues to develop. For example, New Directions for Institutional Research published a special "campus culture,, issue in 1991 (Winter) encouraging university research officers to pay more attention to campus organizational cultural issues and use more cultural research approaches.

Areas for Further Study

A brief discussion of a number of potentially fruitful avenues for research are suggested below, although many more could be developed as well.

Campus Subcultures

As I have discussed above, a particularly fertile and relatively undeveloped area for research is the exploration of conflict management approaches used by various campus subcultures. As anthropologists and historians interested in dispute processing have noted, cultural subgroups have often developed internal methods of resolving disputes to protect their group from involvement by outside "authorities" or systems of laws that don't take into account their norms and values. Jerold Auerbach's book Justice Without Law (Auerbach, 1983) provides a facinating account of alternative dispute resolution methods used in colonial America. These non-judicial approaches were successful as long as they involved individuals or groups who shared certain basic beliefs and who subscribed to shared norms of behavior. When conflicts emerged between individuals from different groups, or as group unity broke down, the use of lawyers and the common law became more prevelant. As Auerbach argues, "Law begins where community ends." Because of the existence of multiple subcultures on campus, the need for "organizational spaces" for cross-cultural (in the broadest sense) problem-solving forums such as ombuds programs or campus mediation centers may become even more clear as our understanding of campus subcultural norms for conflict management become better understood.

Indigenous Resources

Another interesting area of related research, and one where I think ombuds would play an important role, is in the identification of the "indigenous" problem-solvers who are found within various campus domains. within any community, one can usually find individuals who, based on their interpersonal skills or social position, are frequently approached by people seeking problem-solving assistance. Ombuds often have contact with these members of the community, and could very likely assist researchers in identifying and then gaining access to these individuals for interviewing. Finding out more about how these parties do their conflict management work may provide ombuds with additional insight into how they might improve their own practice, and how they might further address supporting and empowering "homegrown" approaches to problem-solving.

Patterns of Conflict

Another important area where ombuds have access to useful knowledge is around patterns of conflict on campus. Because many ombuds programs already produce annual reports that share aggregate statistics, ombuds are likely to be quite familiar with and interested in patterns of conflict on campus. Careful interviewing by researchers might encourage ombuds to further reflect on their practice, exploring in more detail their perceptions of the patterns of conf lict on campus, be they temporal, topical, or structural in nature. Increased understanding of these patterns should prove quite valuable when considering the development of conflict prevention efforts.

Potential Problems

While I am enthusiastic about the potential value of an increased research role by ombuds, I am aware that a number of potential problems could effect the success of such efforts. These problems might include the creation of suspicion and/or potential alienation of "clients" whom the ombuds decides to invite into the research, who are unhappy with the suggestion. Another difficulty might involve struggles between academics and ombuds over the focus of the research agenda, with academics attempting to usurp the agenda, leaving ombuds feeling somewhat taken advantage of. Another possible problem, familiar to ombuds, is the creation of additional time demands on already overtaxed ombuds staff who are asked to regularly reflect on their practice in the presence of a collaborating researcher.

Potential Benefits

I believe that the potential benefits of having ombuds more involved as researchers outweighs the potential problems. Potential benefits include improved practice, increased selfawareness, and perhaps additional legitimacy for ombuds practitioner, who often work in environments that priviledge research. The collaborative approach I

have started to outline here can also help to strengthen ties between ombuds and the growing number of academics interested in dispute processing.

Conclusions/Next Steps

In order to pursue this possible expansion of the ombuds role, a number of next steps might be considered. These include a greater elaboration and specification of the research agenda, compilation of a more complete bibliography of existing campus culture studies as they relate to conflict, and the development of dialogues on this issue between qualitative researchers and ombuds, either via email, or in person at some kind of workshop or conference session. Ombuds would need to identify additional areas of concern, and help develop research practices that respect existing campus relationships. Also, some decisions about how central a role the ombuds should play in the research will have to be worked out, as the ombuds could play an active role conducting interviews and gathering observational data, or they could serve in more of an informant and guide role, as seems appropriate given their individual situations.

As ombuds well know, conflict is a regular part of life on college and university campuses. Hopefully, more research and greater understanding of the dynamics of campus conflict will help us improve the delivery of dispute resolution services, learn from existing conflicts, and reduce the amount of time lost due to conflict that could be better put into the pursuit of teaching and learning.

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