

Racial and Ethnic Conflict on Campus

by Howard Gadlin

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The following remarks were presented at the conclusion of the 1990 conference of UCOA (University and College Ombudsmen Association) by outgoing UCOA President Howard Gadlin on April 7, 1990 at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor. Although from an ombuds perspective, Gadlin's remarks are particularly relevant to this discussion of conflict resolution on campus because they focus on racial and ethnic conflicts which are at the heart of much current campus conflict.

The chance to represent a farewell address provides me with the opportunity to reflect on the state of our profession as well as to sum up some of the most salient aspects of this year's meeting. Two things come to mind. First, I was struck by the contrast in tone and mood between the last presentation on foreign students and the first session on the legally frustrated efforts of the University of Michigan to implement a racial harassment policy. The discussion of foreign students and their problems was relaxed and almost playful as we contemplated the misperceptions, insensitivity's and miscommunications that often characterize interactions between foreign students and their host institutions. By contrast, the discussion of racial harassment and policies intended to control or eliminate it were guarded and tense, each of us being cautious lest we reveal that we too share in the misperceptions, insensitivities and miscommunications that characterize interactions between

different races in this country.

Second, while listening to papers during this year's annual meeting, I was also thinking about the growth in the number of ombuds offices over the past few years. Although it is satisfying to see the expansion of the notion of ombudsman, it is with some concern that I contemplate the missions that are being defined for these new offices, as well as the changes in the functioning of long established offices. Many of the new programs have been set up in direct response to the outbreaks of racial and ethnic harassment and strains in race relations that have been polluting the atmospheres of our campuses. And although I feel passionately about these problems of race and ethnicity, I have some concerns about the ways in which ombuds offices are being used, and ombudsmen are being cooped, in the effort to develop adequate responses to racial tension.

Briefly, my concern is that the ombudsman is being transformed from an internal watch dog and critic to a member of the team committed to institutional maintenance and stability. In the course of this change, ombudsmen become problem solvers serving institutional goals rather than principles of justice, morality and fairness. Clearly ombudsmen are, among other things, problem solvers. But it is not effectiveness at problem solving that differentiates us from others on campus; rather, it is what we do that makes us different. Let's remind ourselves of what that is: 1) we stay outside - we are independent; 2) we respond to grievances; 3) we are not on the team, even though we may feel deeply committed to the institution; 4) we help people and the institution frame matters differently.

Throughout this meeting, people gave presentations illustrating the ways in which helping others reframe an issue was the first and

often crucial step toward a satisfactory solution. In addition to conceptualizing problems along different dimensions, there is another way in which we frame things differently than those with administrative responsibilities - they see issues against a backdrop of cost effectiveness, we see issues in a spotlight of justice.

These differences become especially important when we examine the role of the ombudsman in relation to racial incidents and the development and implementation of racial harassment policies. In offering these cautionary remarks, I am not suggesting that we, as ombudsmen, should not be involved in responding to issues of racial harassment. Indeed, some of the complaints we receive are about unfair treatment for reasons of race, ethnicity, sexual preference, gender, etc. Nor am I implying that we ought not to be participants in committees drafting racial harassment policies or programs designed to assist those who are subjected to racial harassment. Each of us has to make decisions about such activities in the light of the social and political dynamics of our own campus and our own sense of what is appropriate for our ombuds office. But I want to urge that we be wary of the way our institutions frame their understanding of the problems they have and the means available to address these problems.

Let us look, for example, at policies of racial harassment. We are told that these policies are intended to create a campus free of harassment, that they are expressions of, the school's commitment to multiculturalism and civility. And we are told that this commitment justifies rethinking freedom of speech and academic freedom, not only for responding to malicious and intentionally harmful acts, but also for reacting to actions that reflect a lack of sensitivity to what some people consider offensive. All well and good, if we accept the intent of these policies as they are named by their proponents.

But I do not believe our schools are committed to creating' climates free of harassment. And I do not believe harassment policies are intended to create climates free of harassment. Let us remind ourselves of the history of sexual harassment policies on campuses. Sexual harassment policies did not come into place because colleges and universities were sensitive to the problems of women students, faculty and employees whose education and careers were disrupted and undermined by widespread practices of sexual harassment. Sexual harassment policies did not come into place because colleges and universities wanted to create an environment where women were equally at home as men, and where women had the same opportunities as men. Sexual harassment policies came into place because the law required it, because schools without policies were more vulnerable to lawsuits than schools with policies, and because schools did not want to look bad in the eyes of women employees and students who were becoming more assertive about their rights to equal opportunity. Let me be clear I am not saying that schools were in favor of sexual harassment or that they were opposed to having sexual harassment reduced or eliminated, but rather that it simply was not a matter of enough concern to warrant the policies, program and personnel necessary to change the basic campus culture that sustained sexual harassment. It is the same with racial harassment.

It is not that administrators want it to continue. It is not that they condone racism. It is not that they would not be pleased to see racial incidents eliminated. But colleges and universities are not prepared to do what it takes to move toward the creation of campuses that are genuinely multicultural. What the schools want is to avoid incidents that present them in an unfavorable light and make them vulnerable to legal action; to meet their own quotas so that they can appear to be integrated; and to avoid criticism from

minorities; and guilty liberals. Again let me be clear. I do not believe that limitations are the fault only of the administrators. Neither the faculty, nor the students, nor the employees of colleges and universities have distinguished themselves through programs and efforts to create multicultural campuses. Each of these groups has been more adept at laying blame than creating change. And this leads me to a further concern about the racial harassment policies and my hesitations about ombuds people participating in their creation and implementation.

Harassment policies organized around disciplinary and punitive sanctions allow us to locate social ugliness in the deficiencies and pathologies of the other. They allow us to ignore the larger problems associated with moving toward truly multicultural organizations. Such policies also allow us to ignore the fact that we do not live in an integrated society, we live in a society where there is some limited mixing. Most of our institutions are committed to sustaining their identities; functions and power hierarchies in the face of pressure to change, even while they profess to be on the cutting edge of change.

The institutions' understanding of the problems that confront them are very much a part of the problems themselves. To be sure there are racists and hooligans out there and they cause more than their share of difficulties. But the problems of race and ethnicity on campuses cannot be attributed only to trouble makers. I believe we have, as ombuds people, the responsibility to resist the temptation to frame issues in the same way as the rest of the campus community. After all, part of the reason we exist is because of the way issues are framed by the rest of the campus community. If they haven't learned to do it right with respect to grade disputes, disciplinary procedures and a whole host of other administrative and academic issues, there is no reason to believe they can do it right

when it comes to issues of race.

*As an addendum to this speech, Gadlin makes these remarks about mediating racial conflict for this issue of **The Fourth R**.*

Clearly, there is a need for racial conflict: racial differences, distrust, hostilities and suspicions exist and need to be voiced, not suppressed. But they need to be voiced in such a way and in a context that keeps them from becoming destructive and vicious. The idea behind conflict resolution and mediation is that conflict is a natural, inevitable and acceptable part of life. The role of mediation and other forms of conflict resolution is to allow conflict to occur in ways that are not destructive. Racial harassment policies, although they may be necessary as a way to respond to outrageous instances of racial hatred, generally serve to create an atmosphere in which people are reticent to address directly issues of race and racial differences. My interest is in developing a team of people who are prepared to intervene, on invitation, in situations where disputants feel race may be part of the problem and where they would like assistance in addressing the issue of race in productive ways. At UMass, I have been working to put together a diverse, multi-racial team willing to develop our own internally generated training so that we might come up with appropriate modes of intervention. Among the skills we will work with are mediation skills, but we will not be limited to mediation as the mode for intervention. In fact, in selecting people for the group, I did not concentrate on the mediation community because I felt the foremost requirement was a demonstrated sensitivity to racial issues and some ability to rise above mere partisanship with respect to these conflicts. (In any case, there were very few people in the local mediation community who met the criteria and the mediators are a singularly un-diverse group of people.) In developing our training, we will be incorporating racial and cultural differences into the mediation

process, including training about communication styles, conflict styles, different expectations for mediation and neutrality and different approaches to emotions and aggressiveness.

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