

CONFLICT MANAGEMENT IN HIGHER EDUCATION REPORT

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Promoting Mediation Center Quality Awareness Using Guided Self-Assessment

by Craig Colettea

The National Association for Community Mediation (NAFCM) recently released its Self-Assessment Manual for Mediation Center Quality Assurance, the association's first major foray into the credentialing/quality assurance debate within the ADR field.

As mediation services become more and more sought after and common in society, there is an increased need for consumers (individuals seeking mediation services or organizations seeking to refer cases to mediation) to have an easy to understand, reliable means of assessing the quality of services and providers. To date, most attempts to ensure quality mediation have revolved around "roster management" or other means of determining the amount of training/experience individual mediators possess and using these criteria to determine who will receive cases. Attempts to develop a field-wide set of training or practice standards have been faced with the challenge of finding ways to include the wide variety of mediator styles and methods as well as the fact that the definition of "quality" service can change from case to case.

NAFCM's manual attempts to address these challenges by focusing not on the direct provision of services themselves, but rather on the quality of the system through which cases are managed, mediators are trained and evaluated, and mediation centers determine what "quality" means in their communities. By encouraging community mediation centers to examine their goals and values in light of their communities' needs and values and to develop their own approaches to serving these needs effectively, NAFCM's self-assessment approach aims to increase quality without imposing restrictive and inappropriate standards. The manual is being made available at no cost to NAFCM members, and for \$25 a copy to non-members. For ordering information see <http://www.nafcm.org/pg54.cfm>.

The following two excerpts from the manual's Preface discuss some of NAFCM's thinking about quality assurance issues:

- On the reasons for a quality assurance system:

There are two broad purposes of this self-assessment manual:

Center Self-Improvement. Self-assessment is a critical first step towards organizational renewal and improved services to our clients. This manual is a vehicle through which a mediation center can identify areas of strength and weakness.

Accountability. Our field is identifying criteria and/or standards for operations and participation. Some of these criteria are becoming generally accepted as defining areas in which centers (and/or other non-profit agencies) should be held accountable. Self-assessment is a tool that allows centers to demonstrate and document their compliance with these criteria.

- On “quality” defined in the context of individual mediation centers

...centers using the manual determine how well their operations reflect their own declared and implicit values. This is expressly highlighted in some sections, e.g., ethics, but should be understood to be paramount in all aspects of the center's work.

This Manual is designed for self-assessment and/or use by one center when requesting review by a peer. It can also be incorporated in evaluations performed by others if the center desires.

The self-assessment approach was selected for a number of reasons. Self-reflection is an approach and a value recognized by most mediators and should be familiar to those running mediation centers. When an assessment is performed "in-house" by people familiar with operations, it often increases the likelihood that the results of the evaluation will be incorporated into the actual practice of the mediation center. Additionally, the actual experience with the assessment process provides the center with a methodology for ongoing monitoring of their activities and with an understanding of the importance of this function. We hope this assessment will have a longer range effect on the mediation centers involved than an outside evaluation might.

We have attempted to design the manual so it can be used by centers at very different stages of development -- just-opened centers as well as multi-year veterans. Thus, not all sections will be useful to all potential users. For example, the center management portion (Module 1) may be elementary for some centers while helpful to others.

The NAFCM manual is divided into three major sections dealing with general non-profit management, mediation center operations, and volunteer mediator training, evaluation, and development. Within each section, the manual presents “considerations” which represent broad statements of general principle to which most if not all mediation centers aspire.

As a partial example of considerations presented, in the section on Mediation Center Operations, centers are encouraged to address five core areas, namely

1. Ethical Practices and Values
2. Referrals
3. Intake and Screening
4. Case Management
5. Public Awareness

To continue the example, within the Case Management subsection participants are then guided through an exploration of

- Case Manager Training,
- Record Keeping,
- Participant's Adequacy of Information,
- Communicating with Parties and Mediators,
- Selecting Mediators,
- Potential Ethical Conflicts,
- Mediator Briefing, Logistics: Expected Situations,
- Logistics: Protocols for the Non-routine or Unexpected,
- Case Follow Up.

Considerations are followed by a range of questions, indicator checklists, resources, and examples that allow centers to develop unique and appropriate approaches to meeting their communities' needs and improving the quality of their services.

One of the other ways that NAFCM supports centers in this work is the provision of an ongoing series of Regional Training Institutes, the next round of which are occurring November 6-7, 2003 in Dayton, Ohio or November 13-15, 2003 in Saratoga Springs, New York. The upcoming Institutes are on developing and managing community mediation centers. Subject areas in the Institute were chosen by NAFCM members via survey and include: Government Relations; Public Education; Evaluation; Center Administration; Program Development; Fund Development; Case Management; and Volunteer Partnerships. Over the course of the two days, participants can choose to attend 4 of the available subject sessions most relevant to their situation. While focused on community mediation, most of the information provided should have direct relevance to campus-based mediation centers as well. More information on the Institutes is available at the NAFCM website, <http://www.nafcm.org>.

Currently, NAFCM is exploring ways of institutionalizing the self-assessment approach reflected in our manual to create a voluntary credentialing program for mediation center quality assurance and improvement programs. We welcome any feedback or input about the design or application of mediation center quality assurance.

For more information about the manual or other NAFCM quality assurance efforts, please e-mail Craig Coletta at ccoletta@nafcm.org.

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Editor's note: The Self-Assessment Manual for Mediation Center Quality Assurance was edited by Melissa Broderick and Ben Carroll.