A Guide on the Mediation Process for Resident Assistants at Illinois State University

from Community Rights & Responsibilities
Dean of Students Office
August 2004
Introduction

Conflict is a natural part of life. Conflict takes place in every important relationship that we have. How we manage conflict is critical to the health of our relationships with family members, friends, co-workers, neighbors, teachers, and everyone else that we come into contact with.

Conflict will certainly occur in the residence hall environment. Roommates will feud, neighbors will clash, and residents of the floor may find conflicts both with you and other residence hall staff members.

It is important to remember that conflict resolution is a skill. How you address these conflict situations will have a direct impact on a person’s satisfaction with his or her experience living in the residence halls. It is important that you know the most effective role that you can play, and when it is best for you to step aside and serve as a referral agent.

This guide has been designed to assist you in better understanding your role as a Resident Assistant.
Are Resident Assistants Mediators?

Many Resident Assistants view themselves as mediators of conflict. After all, they are third parties who step into a conflict and try to help people work out their differences. Isn’t this mediation?

No, it is not mediation.

Although this is a practice that shares certain skills with mediation, the Resident Assistant is inherently not viewed as a mediator. As we will see in a few moments, the Resident Assistant does not meet several important aspects of the definition of a mediator?

Well, then if I am not a mediator, what am I?

A Resident Assistant is a helper, trying to assist students in a process known as facilitation. As a facilitator, the RA tries to get people to express their views and listen to one another in the hopes of finding common ground to achieve a solution. Often, the role of the RA is to help people listen to one another, to help people find a middle ground or to compromise. Often though, the RA must also reinforce community expectations and remind people on the limitations of their agreements.

But this is still an important role, isn’t it?

Yes, your role is critical to the well being of the residence hall environment. Most situations that you will encounter are situations that are best handled through facilitation, and best addressed by you as the person living in the environment.

So what is different about mediation?

Mediation is a formalized and structured process in which a neutral third party assists the people in conflict to air out their dispute, develop a list of issues to resolve, generate and test possible solutions, and engage in a non-directed negotiation of a settlement that all people involved are satisfied with.

It is very different from your role as a facilitator in several respects:

1. Training
Mediators are people who have been through significant training on both conflict resolution and the formal mediation process (normally at least 25 to 30 hours of basic skills training). This far exceeds training provided to residence hall staff members. Illinois State University is also very fortunate to have one of the finest mediation training programs in the nation.

2. Mediators are neutral parties (often completely unknown to the parties) and thus have no vested interest in the outcome.

As a Resident Assistant, you have two important interests that may compromise your ability to assist students. First, your familiarity with the people and/or the dispute may lead one, both, or all people to conclude that you are not neutral. Perhaps they fear you prefer one party over another, or clearly favor a certain outcome. This concern would cause some people to feel very uncomfortable with you providing assistance.

Second, your interest in maintaining the community and upholding rules and regulations may prevent people from being able to trust you with their dispute. Providing a party that they do not know at all can be very helpful in creating a trusting environment where successful negotiation can take place.

3. Mediators are not viewed as authority figures.

Mediation sessions are guaranteed privacy, and the disputants do not need to worry that the mediator will be required to report matters discussed in mediation. As a result, mediators are seen less as authority figures and more as experts in helping people resolve conflicts.

In addition, mediators do not tell the parties how to resolve the conflict, whereas in many cases people might want the RA to tell them how to “fix it.” Mediators in a formal process do not even offer suggestions to the parties, but trust in the parties ability to resolve their dispute without this type of assistance.

This sounds nice, but does it really work?

In most programs, cases that enter into formal mediation sessions result in an agreement rate of 90% or better. This is no different at Illinois State University, where we have achieved a 90.2% success rate since 1997. Once the parties enter
the formal mediation environment, they are very likely to achieve a successful resolution to their dispute.

In addition, formal mediation is a widely accepted practice in education, business, judicial, and civic matters. Mediation enjoys a high success rate for those cases that make it to a session, and mediated agreements are almost always successful over the long term. This is due to the parties investment in the outcome.

Finally, mediation can be very beneficial for the Resident Assistant. By bringing in neutral outsider, the RA assures that the dispute is being taken care of, while also helping to protect the credibility and neutrality of the RA on the floor.

So when would I initiate a referral to mediation and how would I do it?

When to refer people to mediation can be found below in the next section. As far as how, that is easy.

Write to mediate@ilstu.edu and tell us about the situation. Tell us who is involved and how we can reach them. We can provide written assistance in return, and let you know if the case appears suitable for mediation. If the case seems appropriate for mediation, we will be happy to contact the parties to see if they are interested.

You can also call us at 8-8621 or send us a note at Campus Box 2440. Our office is in 120 Student Services Building.

Additionally, a mediation program poster and brochure can be found on our web site, and are available for you to download, print, and post.
An RA Guide:

When to Refer to the University Mediation Program
Adapted from Bill Warters’ “Mediation in the Campus Community” (2000)

- One or both disputants seem hesitant to discuss the conflict with me.
- One or both disputant seems to be dealing with a very personal, and potentially embarrassing, situation.
- If my attempts to resolve the situation don’t seem to be working.
- If I am biased or have a strong opinion about a person or issue.
- If I am feeling “fed up” with a situation.
- If I am in conflict with a resident or with another staff member.
- A large group of people is involved.
- If I fear that letting the conflict go is likely to result in larger problems down the road.

HAVE A QUESTION?

Give us a call at 8-8621 or e-mail us at mediate@ilstu.edu