

# NAVIGATING AND NEGOTIATING CONFLICT IN AN ACADEMIC COMMUNITY

BAG LUNCH FOR DEPARTMENT CHAIRS  
OFFICE OF THE VICE PROVOST – ACADEMIC AFFAIRS

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PAUL E. HARRIS, DIRECTOR, ACADEMIC EMPLOYEE AND LABOR RELATIONS  
BINNIE SINGH, ASSISTANT VICE PROVOST

HOSTED BY ACADEMIC AFFAIRS

# Objectives for Today

- Provide strategies to address issues and minimize potential for escalation
- Connect issues that come up in the department
- Increase awareness of ripple effect of conflict
- Become aware of and utilize resources for managing conflict
- Identify gaps in support for chairs – what issues aren't being addressed adequately?

# Overview/Agenda

- Conflict in academia
- Proactive steps to take
- Steps to conflict management
- Case studies – GROUP WORK
- Resources
- The aftermath of conflict
- Questions/Discussion



# Unique factors in academia that impact conflict management

- |   |   |
|---|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Faculty autonomy &amp; independence</li><li>• Team-oriented decision-making on program issues/changes</li><li>• Lengthy faculty careers</li><li>• Rotational nature of leadership</li></ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Differing philosophies</li><li>• Competition for limited resources within the college/school/discipline</li><li>• Lack of preparation for managing people</li><li>• Power dynamics</li><li>• OTHER FACTORS?</li></ul> |
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Source [\*Mending the Cracks in the Ivory Tower: Strategies for Conflict Management in Higher Education\*](#) by Cynthia Berryman-Fink



How's it been going for you in your chair role?

What specific conflicts are you seeing, managing ... trends?

# RESOURCES

# SCENARIO

- You've noticed that two members of your department/program seem to be at odds. Pre-pandemic, you used to see them chatting in each other's offices, often going out for coffee/lunch, and engaging together at meetings. You notice that the few times these colleagues have been on campus on the same day, you haven't seen them together in person. In zoom meetings, they are sometimes "snippy" with each other and somewhat disrespectful. You have also received some private zoom chat messages from other colleagues concerned about these exchanges.
  - Is there anything that concerns you about this situation?
  - Do you have a role to play?

# Be proactive

- “Living the Principles of Community” eCourse (and facilitated discussion, speakers, etc.)
- Use faculty meetings to set climate and allow for input & feedback
  - Ground rules can be created, involving all the faculty and then gain agreement from all to use them going forward. Include norms such as: cameras on, raising hand for speaking, etc.
- Foster discussion regarding how, as a department/group and interpersonally, issues are addressed
- Follow through and follow up consistently
- Model effective behavior and engagement
- Ombuds

**Have any of you tried any of these? If so, how has it worked?**



# Steps to managing conflict

Plan

Act (waiting will not make it go away)

Resources (consult)

Document

## Plan: Questions to ask and share with resources

- Potential policy violation? Required to notify anyone? (review resource list)
- What harm is caused by this conflict?
- What do I know about the parties?
- Is there prior history? Who would know?
- Who can help determine the best approach?
- Logistics - when, where, and how to intervene?

# Act: Things to consider

- Intervene early and as needed!
- Perfection is not the goal
- You know the person, what approach will work
- Depending on the issues, grad chair connects and works with dept chair
- One example: “Documented conversations” with *talking points* from Academic Affairs
  - keep the conversation on track
  - develop consistency for future cases

# Resources: Consulting

- Your Dean's Office can be a great place to start.
- They may be familiar with the issue and have insights and strategies to address the problem.
- Academic Affairs, depending on the issue(s), would be good next offices to consult about these types of issues. We may have more history about the parties involved and can offer ideas on approach.

# Resources: Consulting (cont'd)

Reasons to consult with campus resources:

- Reduce potential for escalation
- Responding and managing in a manner consistent with the level of issue
- You don't have to be the "expert"
- Extra help
- You may be too close to those involved (colleagues) – need outsider's view
- Large issues, policy implications
- Share the liability

***Ideas on some of the campus resources that could be useful?***

Note: Acad Affairs works regularly and closely with a number of campus resources



WHEN MUST YOU CONSULT OR  
ELEVATE AN ISSUE?



# Group Exercise



# What's going on in your world?

- Let's discuss one of the conflicts you're currently facing.
  - What issues, if any, come up for you?
  - What is preventing you from taking this on?
  - What, if anything, will you do or say?
  - What resources might you connect with?



# RESOURCES

# Document:

- Document for yourself along the way, as needed (note to file)
- When appropriate, document back to the individual(s)
- Don't keep unnecessary documentation in your file
- If this has happened before, documenting may not be enough – may need to elevate (dean, Academic Affairs, etc.)
- Academic Affairs can help with any part of this, e.g., creating talking points, reviewing draft correspondence, etc.



## The Aftermath

- Confidentiality - need to know
- Ripple effect – follow up
- Support services

## Tips for minimizing harm

- Share what can be shared (consult about this with central campus) ---  
ambiguity breeds fear and catastrophizing
- Over-communicate – People don't hear well when they're stressed
- Accept and promote the idea that conflict is part of being human

# LET'S ACKNOWLEDGE...

- You can't control other people's actions, decisions, etc.
- You're close to those involved
- Fight or flight – a body's response to threat (reputational, emotional, not necessarily physical)
- Anxiety is a response to emotion, not an emotion itself

(Are you angry, sad, guilty, apprehensive ...)

# Top 10 list for managing conflict

1. As a chair, try to connect with the previous chair as part of your transition so you are aware of some of the history as you take on the role. This can impact your approach.\*\*
2. Be mindful of what's going on around you.
3. Be ready to get involved when something is brought to your attention.
4. Consider what role is best for you to play, direct or indirect. Make a plan.
5. Use your campus resources as needed through your planning and follow up steps.
6. Document conversations that involved you counseling/coaching involving concerning behaviors.
7. Engage in follow-up activities as needed to see if things have improved or if more is needed.
8. When involving faculty/academic conduct, please engage with Academic Affairs or Grad Studies for student/postdoc issues, so we can support your efforts.\*\*
9. Become familiar with those policies requiring reporting, e.g., SVSH.
10. As a leader, consider best ways to minimize conflict and set the tone for your department/program.

\*\*Prior history of concerning behavior will influence how a new incident is managed. Consult with Academic Affairs.

# QUESTIONS?

## Thank you!

Paul E. Harris, [peharris@ucdavis.edu](mailto:peharris@ucdavis.edu)

Binnie Singh, [binsingh@ucdavis.edu](mailto:binsingh@ucdavis.edu)