



Building Skills that Encourages Open and Inclusive Conversations

Project Lead – Joe Martinez

Summary

This project focused on offering student leaders and staff the opportunity to build skills that may help them express their ideas with others that also encourages dialogue and understanding. In the pursuit of supporting free speech and student expression, we believe people who learn the skill set of conflict resolution and mediation might be able to practice those in discussions with those who have different thoughts, ideas, and opinions than their own. This could allow them to focus more on the manner of how they share those thoughts in times of productive debate and discussions.

This project partnered with Yolo Conflict Resolution Center (YCRC) to provide training sessions on campus and virtually. The curriculum from YCRC was developed from a restorative justice model. The trainings were two 90-minute sessions with the first being on Conflict Resolution and the second on Conflict Mediation (total 3 hours).

Learning outcomes of the participants focused on the following areas:

Learning the skills of conflict resolution and mediation

Expressing their perspectives in non-confrontational ways;

Appreciate how working through conflict can help relationships build and grow stronger;

Have more confidence to engage in serious conversation with peers who have different points of view;

Participants:

In February of 2020 a preliminary pilot workshop was conducted in person to have the content evaluated by the campus community including 48 student staff and 13 career staff within Student Affairs units. Those who attended completed evaluation forms and verbal feedback. The theme of the feedback discussed offering more opportunity for the participants to engage in conversations during the training. From the feedback, adjustments were made to the presentation and the questions were formulated to be used for the pre and post tests of future trainings.

Sign ups for trainings began in March of 2020 through May 2021. There were 11 sections of the 2-part sessions offered. (1 Spring 2020, 2 Summer 2020, 2 Fall 2020, 3 Winter 2021, and 3 Spring 2021) 192 people completed pre-test assessment before attending the session. 161 were students, 29 were career staff, and 2 were alumni. 105 of those people submitted the post training survey. In total with the pilot workshop and 11 trainings there were 253 participants.

209 Students 42 Staff 2 Alumni

Findings

The results and outcomes were measured and evaluated using conflict resolution and mediation pre-session and post-session surveys. Each of the surveys included quantitative Likert scale and qualitative open response questions. A full list of the questions and responses are provided at the end of this report. 192 people completed the pre-training survey. Here is a summary of findings from the pre-training responses:

Nearly half (49%) of the participants responded with neutral or disagreed when responding to “I feel I have the tools I need to help me manage conflict with others.”

More than half (52%) of the participants responded with neutral or disagreed when responding to “If asked, I can explain my approach to dealing with conflict.”

27% of the participants responded with neutral, disagree, or strongly disagree when responding I am able to express my perspective in non-confrontational ways.

96% (37% strongly agreed and 60% agreed) of the respondents answered “that working through conflict could help relationships build and grow stronger.”

54% Strongly agreed and 42% agreed that conflict resolution and mediation training can help us to role model the principles of community.

60% Strongly agreed and 39% agreed that open and inclusive conversations can support the principles of community.

These results show that almost all of the participants believe that conflict resolution and mediation training can help role model and support the principles of community but most of them can't explain their approach or don't feel they have the tools to manage conflict.

Examining the post to the pre-training surveys will show if some of the project's objective were met. 105 of 192 (55%) participants completed the post-training survey. Here is a summary of findings from the post-training responses that showed noticeable changes:

97% (42%-strongly agreed and 55% agreed) of the participants responded that “After completing the training I feel I have more tools that may help me manage conflict with others.”

88% (31% Strongly agreed and 57% agreed) of the participants responded that “After completing the training I can explain my approach to dealing with conflict.” 11 % responded with neutral and 1% disagree.

95% (35% Strongly agreed and 60% agreed) of the participants responded that “After completing the training I am able to express my perspective in non-confrontational ways.”

97% (75% strongly agreed/22% agreed) of the respondents answered “that working through conflict could help relationships build and grow stronger.”

99% (65% strongly agreed and 34% agreed) agreed that conflict resolution and mediation training can help us to role model the principles of community.

97% (73% Strongly agreed and 24% agreed) that “open and inclusive conversations can support the principles of community.”

Overall the results of the post-test shows that after completing the training almost all of the participants were more confident in their skills and could explain their approach to conflict. They also responded that the training helped them to see how they could express their perspective in a non-confronting way. In all areas there was an increase of responses that moved to strongly agree or agree. In fact, the post survey had only one person that responded with disagree when it came to the areas of skills to explain their approach or express their perspective in non-confrontational way. With these results the objectives of the project were met.

Potential Impacts on the Campus Community

Here are highlights from the participants who completed the training when asked “One way I can implement these skills from the training will be...”

“To put myself in the shoes of the person saying something I may disagree with and understand their background/influences to see why they may have that opinion.”

“When having conversations about different views, I need to first understand and acknowledge that opposite views exist same as mine.”

“Understanding that my needs are just as important as other people's needs, which is important in engaging collaboratively when addressing conflict, so everyone is in a win-win situation.”

“I will make sure to sit down and talk to the person that I am having a conflict with and listen to their side and express my side of the story. That way we can come to a conclusion and resolve our conflict in a peaceful manner.”

Here are highlights from the participants who completed the training when asked “An area that I want to continue to learn about conflict resolution and mediation is...”

“How to not be biased in a conflict. Some topics can be triggering and we might have preconceived thoughts so how to try and step away from that.”

“Just being more open minded to be able to acknowledge both parts of the story.”

“How we can use it to resolve race relations, because it is truly tearing apart the country and I want to learn how to get people to see that we may come from different backgrounds but we can still coexist in peace, and even cooperate.”

“I want to learn more about de-escalation, especially in situations where people are unwilling to hear other perspectives, listen to others involved, or even try to resolve the situation.”

“How to create a safe space for those who are finding it difficult to tell their side of the story.”

“How to respond and how to take conflict and transform into something less aggressive or argumentative and rather a discussion during which I can learn.”

Here are highlights from the participants who completed the training when asked “What I appreciated most from the training...”

“I appreciate how it is a topic we do not normally talk about and I like how it was a reflective moment for myself.”

“I appreciated that this topic was raised at all! I appreciated learning that there is not a single approach to conflict resolution. That our style can and should vary by situation and out of consideration for the person(s) we are interacting with.”

“Is being able to voice my thoughts and methods of conflict resolution and hearing constructive feedback on how to make that better.”

“Is how I was able to understand that most conflicts are brought about from miscommunication or misunderstandings.”

“Learning how important it is to listen and sometimes take a step back instead of getting more involved. I learned that there is not always just one right and wrong because each person always believes that they are right. Rather than being an argument or conflict, I want to try to implement taking a moment and reflecting as to what is actually going on, how things lead to this point, and calming down. Conflict does not always have to turn aggressive or heated, people can learn and grow from it by being respectful and taking in the other person's perspective, trying to understand where they are coming from.”

These responses demonstrate that those who completed the training want to implement the skills and continue learning. They had an appreciation for understanding how to look at things from a different perspective and have empathy in difficult conversations. Other departments who had individuals participate want to host similar trainings. The Leadership Specialist from the Center for Student Involvement developed a workshop focused on conflict management and transformation. Yolo Conflict Resolution Center staff want to continue to build a relationship and inform students of opportunities for them to continue learning and building these skills so they can role model them for others. Participants from this project will also be encouraged to participate in the 2021-2022 VOICE grant project at UC Davis providing Sustained Dialogue Training. Lastly the collected data could be further analyzed to see other potential findings. The results of those would be shared with the National Center for Civic Engagement and could also be requested at jammartinez@ucdavis.edu

What was challenging about completing your project?

Originally the trainings were to be in person and have 350 participate. Due to Covid 19 the Yolo Conflict Resolution Center developed methods to provide virtual sessions through zoom for up to 25 people each session. Offering incentives for people to participate did help but the original goal of 350 was not met.

The first the trainings were two 90-minute sessions with only an hour break in between each. After evaluations from the early participants came in it was discovered there needed to be more time in between session. Eventually one session was offered then the second session a week after. This gave more time for the participants to reflect on each section. Some participants did suggest that two sessions was a large time commitment.

In the hopes to get as many participants as possible the sessions went through middle of May 2021. This presented an issue as not all of the participants responded immediately after their session. Several reminders were sent out and some responses still came in after the original deadline of May 20th, 2021. Having the post training survey come in so late presented a time constraint on analyzing the data. This provided report

How might the Center change the process moving forward to further support VOICE Initiative awardees' efforts?

Potentially having the reports due by July 1st might be helpful as June first is so close to finals for students. Maybe one approach would be to have all funds processes and budgets finalized by June 1st and the executive summary later. I think there are some good ideas on mentoring future VOICE recipients. Hopefully when the conference is able to happen again there might be a chance for VOICE recipients to have a day together as cohort rather than just a morning. This could allow more time for them to brain storm with others and potentially have former VOICE recipients give them feedback based on their work.