

Mediation office gains funds for pilot program

Focus fixed on student grievances, disputes

By Sarah Kitchen
Of the Emerald

An office of mediation is expected to begin its six-month pilot program at the University during winter term.

The Incidental Fee Committee granted funding Thursday for the office to operate for the six-month trial period. The office is co-sponsored by the ASUO Executive and the University.

The idea for the office was presented to the ASUO last month by Sheila Hale, a graduate student in the Interdisciplinary Specialized Individualized Program at the University. Hale has studied and worked with mediation while working on her master's thesis.

The ASUO then took the idea to Dean of Students Shirley Wilson, who agreed there was a need for a mediation office at the University. Hale will be the mediator for the pilot program.

While the University does have places that handle student grievances, it does not have an office specifically for mediation, Wilson said.

The mediation office will handle student-to-student disputes such as roommate disagreements, or differences that arise between student groups. Student-faculty disputes also will be mediated, Hale said.

This type of office is important because there is no other place a student can go with a student-to-student complaint to express his or her unhappiness, Wilson said.

The mediation office would not involve a conflict of interest because the mediator does not side with one person over another, Hale said. The job of a mediator requires the mediator to remain neutral, she said.

"Both the legal services and the office of (student) advocacy are in an adversarial posture - they represent a student against someone else. The mediation process is one where the disputants themselves come up with a resolution, and the mediator stands in the middle and helps them construct, if possible, an agreement for behavior and resolution in the future," Hale explained.

A committee will be appointed consisting of three students and two administrators to oversee the mediation office and for the mediation office to consult with. The students will be appointed by ASUO President Steve Nelson, and the administrators by Wilson's office, said Debra Liebowitz, ASUO coordinator of programs.

"This committee will help me create a program that would be perfect for the University of Oregon," Hale said. "There are some precedents for a program, and that committee will help

gain access and bring ideas and do the evaluation."

The ASUO became interested in co-sponsoring the mediation office at the University because nothing like this exists on campus, Liebowitz said. She believes the idea is a good model of conflict resolution between students, or students and administration, dealing with problems before they reach the grievance stage, she said.

Wilson was introduced to the idea of mediation last year when Hale was involved with several cases of student-faculty mediation, she said. She has been involved with the grievance procedure for 17 years and at first was not sure that Hale's mediation would work.

"I was amazed with her success. I was not sure that she would be successful, but she was successful so she got my attention," Wilson said.

Hale said a mediation office does not exist on any campus in Oregon, although they do exist in different forms on campuses around the country.

"The largest and most excessive program that exists is at the University of Massachusetts," said Hale.

Jane DeGidio, director of student development, said Hale's idea for a mediation office was discussed by Nelson and Wilson beginning last month, and since then there have been three meetings between the University and the ASUO. DeGidio said no location has been decided on for the office, but she believes it will be in the EMU.

The mediation office will have no status and no authority within the University in order to assure that it will not have to side with one party over another, Hale said.

Students could use the office at a pre-grievance level in order to try and prevent the problem from going further; however, the office of mediation also will be able to refer students to other sources if the problem has pro-

gressed. Civil, not criminal, problems and complaints will be handled by the office.

"The essence of most conflicts is that they have duration and are on the interpersonal level," Hale said. "For example, if two people have to live or work together, their relationship will affect their performance.

"Most people run away from a conflict - in order to go from here to there people have to tell their feelings," she added.

The job of a mediator is to listen to each side and in doing so have the parties listen to each other, Hale said. This helps each person see the situation through the other's eyes, she said.

Then issues that need to be discussed are prioritized, and as each issue is worked on, a point of view within the issue is talked about, she explained.

Since the mediation office will be new to the University, Hale said she hopes students will give their opinions on the office to the committee so that improvements can be made where they are seen to be needed.

Gerard Moseley, vice provost for student affairs, said he believes the office of mediation will fill the gap missing for student-to-student complaints. The advocacy office cannot handle student-to-student complaints because student fees are not to be used to pay for a grievance against another student, Moseley said.

"A mediation office would try to avoid a more formal grievance process at a more difficult level - it would cope with differences when they haven't become so inflamed," he added.

The office also will refer students to the proper channels to go through when they have grievances with a faculty member, Moseley said.



Sheila Hale

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