

Program settles students' disputes

By Marina Swain
Emerald Contributor

It might seem surprising that a round wooden table helps resolve interpersonal disputes. But for Jacquie Gibson, such furniture is an essential tool of her trade. As director of the ASUO Mediation Program, Gibson attempts to equalize people in conflict as best she can.

The round table serves as a visual metaphor for putting problems on the table and solving them, she said. It and the office provide neutral territory for people in conflict to resolve their differences.

"It establishes me as the controller of the process," she said. "All they have to worry about is expressing themselves and listening to the other person."

In its second year as a regularly funded service, the Mediation Program is one of only

Gibson said.

University senior Tina Roe turned to mediation to resolve a conflict within Janet Smith, a student-run cooperative living organization. One resident had caused housemates to feel uncomfortable, she said.

Mediation allowed the various affected parties to sit down and talk about their problems. Unfortunately, the group could not come to resolution because the resident was unwilling to sympathize with differing points of view, Roe said.

"I think if there was any hope for resolving the situation it could be really helpful," Roe said of the mediation program. "The situation itself was doomed."

Roe said mediation requires sensitivity to other's needs. "Both parties need to go into it with an open mind or it's not going to work. I think he went into it to prove that he was

ing to more legalistic solutions," she said.

In fact more law schools are offering mediation as a possible remedy, Gibson said. "The good thing about mediation is that agreements are more personalized."

She pointed to clogged courts in which disputants return time and again because of dissatisfaction with the outcome. Because lawyers and judges are making most of the decisions, clients remain unhappy, Gibson said. In mediation, "you have to be responsible for choices."

Mediation can also be more effective than traditional counseling, Gibson said, because it is focused on specific issues during the short term. "What happened in the past is not nearly so important as what we're going to decide today and do tomorrow."

Mediation is building a solid

'The good thing about mediation is that agreements are more personalized.'

— Jacquie Gibson

nineteen on college campuses nationwide, Gibson said. And with 97 cases seen during the last school year, she thinks the need for mediation is great and growing.

"During the middle of the year is when people get most uncomfortable," Gibson said of the rise in disputes she sees throughout the winter months. Squabbling roommates are a typical dispute that she handles. Even more common this year are students who feel professors have treated them unfairly.

Students often find it difficult to express their concerns to professors during office hours, Gibson said. "The professor's office is the professor's office - his or her base of power."

The neutral setting of the Mediation Program "allows the professor to come down and the student to come up," she said. "It helps to balance the power between people in disparate power positions."

Sometimes problems are of a more personal nature. Gibson recalled a case involving two work-study students who had broken off romantic relations. Neither wanted to give up the job. Both were willing to work at making their relationship at the office tolerable. They ended up using indirect signals that let the other person know when he or she was uncomfortable,

right."

Gibson agrees. For mediation to be effective, both people must commit themselves to solving the problem, she said. "Mediation doesn't work unless both people want to get together and make it work."

Mediation's chief advantage is that it allows people to come up with their own solutions to problems, Roe said. "Mediation allows you to work things out on your own with a third party to funnel things back and forth. It's helping you come to your own decisions."

Although the Mediation Program typically handles situations involving housing or professor/student disagreements, it is not limited to particular types of conflict, Gibson said. The program, which is free to the University community, handles any dispute that falls between the cracks of what the Legal Services or the Office of Student Advocacy can do.

"There were all kinds of student problems not being solved because there wasn't anyone there to do it," Gibson said.

Gibson said mediation is a pre-legal alternative. With a masters degree in interpersonal communication, she makes no pretense of being a lawyer nor does she wish to. Disputants "always have the option of go-

track record, Gibson said. The last state Legislature funded the newly created Oregon Dispute Resolution Commission, which looks into implementing mediation at applicable state and county agencies, she said.

The commission intends for mediation to reduce the court load in typically sticky problems such as child custody, visitation rights and child support. Various Oregon counties, including Lane, have already noted a decrease in court time and expenditure, she said.

Students interested in participating in mediation may contact Gibson at 346-4240.

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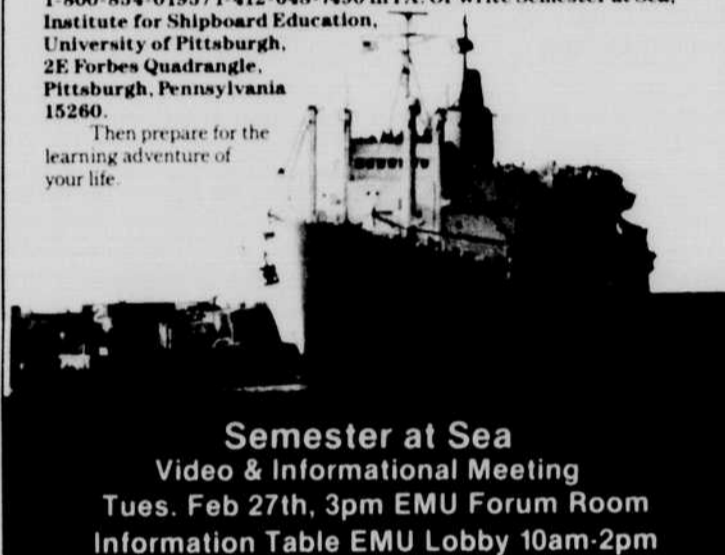
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