

Volunteers keep an eye on campus events

■ The Office of Student Life sponsors a program to have neutral observers at campus events in case of trouble

By Lisa Toth
Oregon Daily Emerald

They're watching us. The Neutral Observer Program of the Office of Student Life provides trained student and faculty volunteer observers at campus events to allow for the availability of unbiased witnesses should any form of escalation arise.

"The idea of the program is to have trained non-participating observers at events on campus, like protests, demonstrations and sit-ins," said Annie Bentz, director of Conflict Resolution Services. "The role of the observer is to stay uninvolved with the actual event and to observe the activity of students, [Office of Public Safety], the community and the police. So if there is any kind of escalation or critical incident, being a situation where there is potential harm to people or property, then the observer writes up a report of what they see."

Conflict Resolution Services offers mediation and facilitation service and training related to conflict resolution for students, faculty and staff.

Bentz said observers are often necessary in situations where there are differing perspectives, high emotion and high energy. Observers are only asked to observe in situations where they feel that they can be objective.

Reports by observers are only released for legitimate reasons, such as a violation of the law, and may be used in the event that action is taken, such as when a person presses charges against another person or group.

The Neutral Observer Program was established at the University in 1990 as a pilot program through the Office of the Dean of Student Life.

Currently, the program is coordinated by Conflict Resolution Services. It is modeled after similar programs at the University of California at Berkeley and the University of Colorado, which were developed in the 1960s.

Observers are trained to make behavioral observations rather than judgments or interpretations. Bentz said other campuses have noted that having impartial observers present at events can have a calming effect on participants. Observers are identifiable at campus events by their bright yellow badges.

Observers have been present at events including the Worker Rights Consortium protests this April and the Johnson Hall sit-in May 18, 1999, when demonstrators demanded the improvement of campus diversity.

Next fall, volunteer observers will participate in five hours of training to gain necessary observation skills to have an objective perspective about an event.

Chris Loschiavo, the director of Student Judicial Affairs, said that he assists Bentz in training the neutral observers to write a report from a neutral standpoint and helps them to develop observation skills.

Aside from the Neutral Observer Program, Loschiavo also trains student resident assistants to write conduct reports.

Bentz said that observers are taught that when they are approached by people involved they

are instructed to be respectful, to give out information about the Neutral Observer Program and to have minimal engagement with the questioner. This allows them to focus on observing the event.

At the WRC rally in April, Sandra Liu, a neutral observer and graduating master's student in the Creative Writing Program, said that the older observers were often approached more than the student observers.

"As an outside observer, it seemed ironic because we were there to observe and perceive, and what turned out to be a difficulty was the perception of us," Liu said. "I didn't expect us to be perceived."

Liu added that she would encourage students to get involved in the program because the observers ensure that students receive fair treatment.

"The term 'neutral' is questionable," Bentz said. "We can do our best to be as unbiased, as objective and as descriptive in our observations as possible."

Currently, this year's team of 10 volunteers consists of faculty, staff, graduate students and one undergraduate student. Bentz said that Conflict Resolution Services is looking for 15 to 20 observers for next year.

Director of Resource Management with Public Affairs Greg Stripp, a volunteer for the program, said he became involved with the Neutral Observer Program at the University partly because he witnessed a similar program that oversaw the police and National Guard at UC-Berkeley in the mid-1960s.

Stripp was an observer at the WRC protest. He said that no critical incidents occurred while he was observing, and consequently, no reports were filed. Regardless, he stressed the significance of being a volunteer in the program.

"It's really important for volunteers to come forward from all groups on campus to lend more credibility to the program," Stripp said.

In the future, Stripp said a similar program could appear in the

Eugene community as well. Preliminary talks began on May 9 between Stripp, Bentz and Greg Rikhoff, a manager in human rights for the city of Eugene, to discuss implementing a Neutral Observer Program in the city.

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