

“Standing on the Shoulders of Good Ideas: The Salisbury University CR Experiment”*

By Brian Polkinghorn, MA, MS, Ph.D.

(*An earlier version of this piece of writing was published in the “FourthR”)

The Salisbury University (SU) Conflict Analysis and Dispute Resolution (CADR) program has experienced incredible success in less than four years. In 2000 there was no major in Conflict Analysis and Dispute Resolution and the Center for Conflict Resolution (CCR), a non-profit organization located within Salisbury University which houses the CADR program, had no programs or projects outside the city limits and virtually no name recognition past the county line. In fact, during my first semester the administration seriously considered closing the Center. Now CCR is a major contractor of various conflict intervention services with governments all over the world, conducts award winning research for federal agencies and state governments and CADR is one of the fastest growing majors on campus. This certainly didn't happen in a vacuum and our success is not based on novel ideas, but it practically did happen over night. That is partially because of lessons learned from other programs. I graduated from both the ICAR (George Mason University '88) and PARC (Syracuse University '94) programs (with a visiting stint at Harvard University's Program on Negotiation) and then jumped head long for the next seven years into the full time development of the DCAR program (Nova Southeastern University) which was, when I arrived, literally a good idea sketched on a piece of paper. Throughout the years, I have also worked with folks around the world on a number of program ideas, seen them develop then honed to an art and subsequently transmitted to other places. This is where SU and CCR have benefited immensely from ideas originally developed and experimented on primarily at ICAR, PARC, PON and DCAR. In essence, the Salisbury University program stands on the shoulders of good ideas conceived of, incubated in and nurtured by other programs and then modified here to meet local program needs. What CCR and SU have produced is arguably a “next generation” program. The best way to explain this distinction requires a description of how the Salisbury “experiment” was set up and how it now operates.

For the most part the CADR program is a traditional academic unit, housed within the Sociology Department, whose pedagogical approach is to mix abstract theory, models, and substantive expertise with concrete experiential learning via process development and mentored practice. CCR comes into play as the “practice arm” and “teaching hospital” for students and faculty in the CADR major. Just like medical students in a hospital setting students in the CADR major bring abstract academic and scholarly knowledge into the Center where we provide a supervised “full contact” experiential learning setting that closes the circle from student to teacher. This approach has proven to be wildly successful because once a student has learned the basics and has worked their way up to a level of confidence, and been treated as a young colleague, then they are capable of producing incredible things. Students, in a levelheaded way, enjoy this approach and most have a “can do” and “why not” attitude. In just the last year alone we have had students working in Ireland, England, Kosovo, Bosnia, Macedonia, Indonesia,

Jamaica, Australia and along the eastern seaboard of the US helping to develop programs, working with local conflict resolution experts and conducting extraordinary research that is being presented at major conferences. Some are writing their own grants while others are heading off to places like the Johns Hopkins University to finish their academic careers. However, there is a catch – I am talking about *undergraduate* students.

Before coming to Salisbury I had worked exclusively with graduate students and so the original idea was to have students do most of their supervised fieldwork and practice on or near campus. So through grants, contracts and services (totaling more than \$1.5 million) the students helped develop a Campus Conflict Resolution Club, a Peer Mediation Program and Campus Mediation Center that has trained roughly 40 students in mediation and other forms of conflict intervention and retooled the Community Mediation Program. CCR was substantially restructured to shift more to a “total package” entity that now houses three faculty driven elements that serve to support student development within the “teaching hospital” model. The first was to create a practice team composed of extremely experienced practitioners. These folks function like clinical faculty and conduct conflict intervention work all over the world, but more importantly, also work directly with students. The second step was to develop a research team that has now gone on to win numerous national awards. The research team also directly involves students in various projects such as assessing and evaluating programs throughout the state of Maryland and around the nation. The final element is the teaching and training team that prepares students both from a scholarly as well as a practical perspective to move on in their academic and professional development.

In four short years the Salisbury University program has accomplished a great deal through the student centered “teaching hospital” model. On campus we have mediated more than 100 disputes between students, faculty and even entire departments. We have also worked with more than 20 units and more than 500 people in various intervention capacities. Along the way we have facilitated campus community dialogue on controversial issues as well as conducted appreciative inquiries and dispute systems design work for University administrators. Outside the University the Center has quickly become the highest performing community mediation center in the state of Maryland, where we have mediated hundreds of disputes, facilitated dialogues on such things as diversity, town-to-gown relations, environmental impacts and development disputes. In regard to work in the region and state we have facilitated numerous public meetings and disputes on such as things as watershed restoration plans, Chesapeake Bay Tributary goal setting, the Governor’s Nutrient Management Summit and commercial development in historic bayside communities. CCR-SU along with the Maryland Mediation and Conflict Resolution Office (MACRO) has co-hosted statewide CR meetings and a national conference that attracted folks from 22 programs and 31 universities.

In all of these endeavors students have played a major role helping to organize and actually take part in a meaningful way. Whether by design, desperation or dumb luck by keeping students engaged in as many aspects of our work has proven to be the jet engine that runs the entire operation. My new mantra is “give a student an inch and watch out!”