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The Case of the Missed Exam

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Professor Oliver W. Holmes has taught for many years and has come to the conclusion that the students in his American Government general education course do their best work if he is very precise about his expectations of them. In line with this philosophy, Professor Holmes requires that everyone take the final examination on the day that it is scheduled. The only excuse for missing the examination is an illness that requires a trip to the doctor. Thus, he will give a make-up final exam only if the student brings in a doctor's excuse.

Fall term Jose Acevedo did not attend the last day of class, did not sit for the final examination, and did not contact Professor Holmes. Jose then appeared in Dr. Holmes' office a few days after the beginning of the spring term. He wanted to make arrangements to take the final that he had missed. Dr. Holmes first asked Jose for his doctor's excuse. Jose explained that he was not sick. His uncle on his mother's side of the family had died, and he was attending the funeral in Mexico on the day of the final examination.

What should Dr. Holmes do? Why? What issues are involved?

Use of the Case entitled “Missed Exam”

When I do workshops for faculty on cultural awareness, I conclude the workshop with some case studies. Each of the cases presents a classroom situation in which two cultures collide. The purpose of the cases is to demonstrate that when cultures do conflict, there is no appropriate and formulaic response. Instead, faculty members must evaluate each situation on its own merits and make their own decisions.

Often the cultural collision occurs because students behave appropriately out of their own cultural context and that behavior conflicts with the cultural assumptions of the professor. The central question then becomes to what extent should the instructor or institution accommodate the students’ perspectives and to what extent should the professor or institution expect the students to adapt to the expectations of the dominant U.S. culture.

At the beginning of the workshop participants agree to some ground rules including:

- Everyone will listen respectfully until speakers have finished speaking;
- One person will speak at a time;
- No one will make derogatory comments about any other person or culture.

Participants learn characteristics of the communication patterns of culturally sensitive persons and work with these ideas throughout the workshop. People who have developed a culturally sensitive perspective:

- know their own cultural assumptions;
- do not make value judgments about culture in others;
- respect others’ differences;
- ask explicit questions;
- listen actively until the other person finishes;
- allow extra time in communication;
- negotiate culture individually.

The principles of culturally sensitive communication and the ground rules are important parts of the debriefing of the cases.

In presenting each case, I ask small groups to discuss the issues illustrated in the case based on what they have learned about cultural differences, culturally sensitive communication, and their own expertise. They are asked to identify the issues, suggest a course of action for the professor, and present a summary of their case and conclusions to the large group. The small group discussion takes about ten to fifteen minutes.

During the debriefing period there are two things to watch for. Some-

times participants become very emotional about what they believe to be the right solution. At the other extreme, participants may gloss over the seriousness of the cultural conflict. In the first instance, the facilitator should be prepared to allow the strong emotions to vent. The emotional release will, of course, take place within the context set up with the original ground rules. Additionally, the facilitator may wish to list each position that is presented on a flip chart or chalkboard. Participants then visually see their positions taken seriously. Once the emotion is pretty well verbalized, the facilitator can go back and ask the group to work through the assumptions in each of the ideas. In the second instance, when participants gloss over the seriousness of the conflict, the facilitator will want to probe the solutions and issues to push the participants to a deeper understanding of the cultural conflict. Here skill using questions that force participants to rethink their ideas will be the facilitator's most useful tool. These questions might include:

- Can you broaden that?
- Can you give an example?
- What is the opposite of that?
- I'm not clear about how that connects.
- What do you mean by . . . ?
- Can you elaborate a bit?
- What details support your point?
- Why is that significant?
- How does that fit into the larger context?

In both instances referring to the characteristics of culturally sensitive communication will also move participants to a better understanding of the cases.