

# INSTITUTE FOR SOCIAL CONCERNS COMMUNITY CASES

## DISAGREEMENTS WITHIN COMMUNAL LIFE

SUMMARY: Navigating significant disagreements and tensions regarding community engagement.

FOCUS AREAS	LEARNING OBJECTIVES
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Conflict Resolution</li><li>• Interpersonal Tensions</li><li>• Navigating Uncertainty</li></ul>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. Navigate interpersonal tensions between individuals and communities.</li><li>2. Navigating uncertainty in service of commitments and work.</li><li>3. Navigating strong differences of opinions or perspective.</li><li>4. Explore constructive conflict resolution and communication strategies.</li><li>5. Practice humility and listening in service of personal and communal relationships.</li></ol>

### SCENARIO

Dustin, Clara, and Rana are rising senior students. They have all accepted a summer internship with a local nonprofit which provides short term shelter to people who are unhoused. The nonprofit also works with their guests to find longer term housing opportunities and runs a career center to help with employment. Dustin, a sociology major, will be helping with shelter operations. Rana, an architecture major, will be helping with the housing program and researching housing design for supportive living. Clara, a marketing major, will be working with the career center, assisting with job applications and placements. The three students are living together in a communal setting, in an effort to connect the various components of their work across the organization. Over the first two weeks, things are going well. Each night Rana and Dustin share endlessly about their experiences. Clara, who is more reserved, shares less but seems to be enjoying the work.

One night, Dustin shares about a challenging interaction he had at the site that day. Clara bursts in, "You shouldn't be treated that way, Dustin. I don't know why we're giving these people so many resources, they don't want to improve their lives and they're wasting our time and theirs. All I see all day at the career center is people who just want to go through the motions to get more resources."

Dustin tries to gently push back, but before he can get far, Rana jumps in and starts a heated argument with Clara. A week later, things have still not cooled down. Dustin tries to mediate. Speaking with Clara, Clara says, "I'm committed to this work, and I'll do it, but I won't take back what I said. We're being taken advantage of by too many people."

When he speaks with Rana, Rana says, "Clara's feelings are completely unacceptable. She isn't thinking about the systemic realities people are facing. She's blaming individuals and dehumanizing everyone, even the people who are doing the right thing."

This rift in how to approach community engagement seems ready to tear about their own small community. Dustin isn't sure where to go from here.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Have you ever been in a situation like this (in immersive programs, dorms, teams)? How did it feel? If not, how do you imagine Dustin, Clara, and Rana are feeling?
2. Think through the various student perspectives.
  - a. What might be informing Clara's view?
  - b. Why is Rana so opposed to Clara's opinion?
  - c. What are the risks and responsibilities Dustin faces by trying to mediate?
3. Do you think it's possible to approach this work together even when the students have fundamentally different views about the people they are working with?
4. How might people with different perspectives better work together within the same community engagement?
5. What might a group conversation look like at this point? What are the positive outcomes you might anticipate from this path? What are the negative ones?
6. What might Dustin do to best facilitate a successful outcome? What might he do next if the outcome is uncertain or negative?
7. Who might Dustin reach out to for more support in navigating this situation? What might he feel he is "out of his depth" when it comes to challenges like this?
8. Often communities grow stronger after successful conflict resolution in situations like this one. Why might that be? Have you experience this in your own life?

## FACILITATOR CONSIDERATIONS

- **ANALYZE PERSPECTIVES.** Stay neutral and encourage perspective-taking. Emphasize that conflict is normal—and can be healthy if handled with respect.
- **IMAGINE PERSPECTIVES.** Encourage students to imagine themselves in each role—even if it's uncomfortable.
- **NORMALIZE CHALLENGES.** Normalize growing pains in shared living and offer language like "grace and accountability" to guide group dynamics.
- **APPRECIATE POTENTIAL FOR GROWTH.** Recognize that even if students have strong differences in perspective, they are all still in the process of growth. Strong disagreements don't have to mean an inability to work together.

## CLOSING QUESTIONS

- What's one thing you learned or thought about differently during this discussion?
- If you are preparing to live in an international community setting in the near future, what are some proactive steps you can take now to create a healthy and respectful environment before and after you arrive?