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Graduate Studies in Dispute Resolution: A Delphi Study of the Field's Present and Future

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Within the last 15 years there has been tremendous growth in academic courses and programs in conflict management and dispute resolution, especially at the graduate level. In this article I present findings from recent exploratory research attempting to map the contours of graduate-level academic study in dispute resolution. Changes in the field as it has matured are examined, as are the core skills, knowledge and literature considered essential for future practitioners in the field, ethical challenges faced by dispute resolution programs, and thoughts on the possible role of universities in certifying conflict intervenors. For current purposes the terms conflict management and dispute resolution programs are used more or less interchangeably, and are meant to be distinguished from peace studies programs, which have also experienced important growth and change, but which are beyond the scope of this study.

In 1986 sociologist Paul Wehr conducted a national survey (Wehr 1986) exploring the teaching of conflict resolution. He identified a rapidly growing number of academic courses in conflict resolution that were widely disbursed among various disciplines and practice areas. Out of 500 universities surveyed, 294 offered at least one course. The survey showed a great deal of course proliferation, but not much integration. Instead, the emphasis was on curriculum infusion, with one or more courses on conflict resolution-related topics being added to existing courses of study in a broad range of areas. Over 50 percent of the courses surveyed were concentrated in law, government/political science, sociology/anthropology, business/commerce, and management/organization. Techniques such as negotiation (31.0 percent), collective bargaining (27.9 percent), arbitration (20.0 percent), and mediation (14.3 percent) topped the list of methods addressed in these courses. The survey further revealed that the predominant conflict "arena" was by far Labor Relations (34.1 percent), followed by Public Policy (11.0 percent), Commerce (7.9 percent), and Minority/Majority Relations (7.0 percent).

In the ten years since Wehr's study the field of dispute resolution has continued to grow and change, and academia has followed suit. The field is adopting a more integrated and comprehensive approach to the study of dispute resolution, something relatively absent in 1986. This trend is evidenced by the rapid emergence of numerous graduate-level academic programs focused specifically on conflict management. The very existence of these programs adds growing support for viewing dispute resolution as a distinct academic discipline in its own right. There is also an increased emphasis being placed on conflict interactions at the interpersonal level, and on the development of mediation skills, in comparison to the earlier emphasis on intergroup conflicts

and arbitration and collective bargaining skills that was evident in Wehr's findings. Mastering negotiation techniques, which cross many areas of practice, still remains central to the field.

There are now at least 20 programs in the United States that offer graduate certificates, master's, or doctoral degrees specifically in dispute resolution or its equivalent, and many more are under development. With about half of these programs just beginning to offering their degrees in 1995 or later, the field is quite young overall.

Responding to issues raised by the rapid growth of graduate programs, the Department of Dispute Resolution at Nova Southeastern University hosted a national meeting to explore the direction the field is taking. A number of prior graduate program gatherings helped set the stage for this meeting. A group of conflict resolution degree program representatives met at the National Association for Mediation in Education (NAME) conference in 1994, and a day-long session on dispute resolution in higher education was held at the National Conference on Peacemaking and Conflict Resolution (NCPCR) in 1995. Participants at the NCPCR session recommended a longer meeting of faculty and administrators from academic programs, to provide adequate time to explore the wide range of issues faced by emergent programs. The subsequent 2 1/2 day meeting at Nova Southeastern University in Fort Lauderdale occurred in March of 1996, and was attended by representatives from 15 different graduate-level university programs.

In preparation for the Nova symposium the author conducted a Delphi survey entitled "Mapping the Contours of Graduate Study in Dispute Resolution" (Warters, 1996) to identify areas of concern for these programs, and to explore current practices and beliefs about how to prepare professional dispute resolvers. The Delphi survey method was originally developed in the 1950's by the Rand Corporation for use in military planning and forecasting, but it has since seen much wider application. The method involves a multi-stage process that requires the collection and synthesis of data from a panel of experts from within the field of study. The approach has been characterized as "a method for the systematic solicitation and collection of judgements on a particular topic through a set of carefully designed sequential questionnaires interspersed with summarized information and feedback of opinions derived from earlier responses" (Delbecq 1975, p. 10). The strengths of the method, with its anonymous responses and multiple rounds, are that it permits a group of individuals experienced in a particular field to learn more about what others in their field are thinking, develop some shared judgements and an understanding of where strong differences may exist, develop priorities, and modify their initial impressions based on feedback.

Delphi Survey Methods

The process for conducting the study reported here involved an initial gathering of topics of interest to graduate program representatives, followed by a broad internet and mailed solicitation of nominations of people who would be appropriate participant "experts" for the study, based on the following general criteria:

- a) One or more years experience teaching dispute resolution at the Graduate Level; and/or
- b) Three or more years experience teaching dispute resolution at the undergraduate level, and/or
- c) Significant experience as an administrator of a graduate program specifically focused on dispute resolution.

From the initial pool of nominations, thirty-five (35) respondents were formally invited to participate, and of these, twenty-two (22) agreed to complete the required three rounds of the survey. This group of participants ranged in age from 29-58 years old, and had a collective experience of over 137 years teaching or administering ADR courses. Their areas of academic training included 20 different advanced degrees covering the entire spectrum of social and behavioral sciences. It may be important to note that none of the participants were teaching or working in a law school, although a number had law degrees.

The survey process began with the distribution of a relatively open-ended set of elicitive questions used to identify beliefs and practices in areas such as 1) core knowledge and skills that graduate students should master, 2) essential reading and resource materials, 3) skill training supervision

methods, 4) beliefs about certification of practitioners, 5) beliefs about necessary academic standards, 6) the role of research in these programs, 7) ethical challenges faced by programs, 8) distinctions between doctoral and masters programs, and a number of other areas. The qualitative results received in the first round were summarized. Similar statements made by various respondents were grouped together into succinct statements 1, with all responses remaining anonymous.

The resulting series of statements and lists were then sent back to the whole group in a second mailing, to be rated on a 7-point scale (for most items) according to how accurate or important participants thought these concepts were for the field. Participants were also invited to comment on any statements from round one. The second round of surveys was collected and some basic statistics were calculated for each item, including the average score (the mean), the range (i.e., the highest and lowest score each particular item received, an indication of how wide a difference of opinion exists), and the interquartile range (which provides information on where the central 50 percent of the group placed each item, providing the central tendency of the group). This statistical information on how the group as a whole rated various statements was then sent back to the participants in round three, where they were given one final opportunity to rank and rate items based on the new information and any additional comments made during round two.

A portion of the results from the third round is presented here. While not definitive for the field as a whole, as each group of experts will differ in their perceptions and practices, these findings are thought to represent a pretty good sketch of the current thinking and practice in graduate programs in dispute resolution, illustrating areas where there is some consensus, and areas where there is still considerable differences of opinion and practice. The results should help lay the groundwork for future discussions, elaborations, and refinements as the field defines itself and continues to mature.

Results from Study

Some of the results from the study's third round are presented in a series of tables, with items or statements with higher average scores (i.e. higher levels of agreement or perceived importance) listed first in descending order. The statements or items on the lists were drawn directly from participant responses to the open-ended first round of the survey. While rankings provide important information, readers should consider list items important in themselves because they provide some indication of what people in the field are concentrating on. In addition to looking at the average score of each item, it is also useful to consider the range, as this indicates how widely the scores varied, giving one a sense of how broad the diversity of opinion there was in the group on any particular item.

As a starting place, participant experts were asked to comment on the current focus of dispute resolution as an academic field. As the statements and rankings presented in Table 1 indicate, Dispute Resolution was thought to be by its very nature interdisciplinary, both theoretical and practical, and to hopefully be more science than an art.

Table 1

(Note: 1 = no agreement w statement, 7=complete agreement w statement)

Overall Focus of the Dispute Resolution Academic Field	Average Score	Central 50% of Responses	Range of Responses
DR is essentially interdisciplinary	6.6	6-7	5-7
DR in academia is essentially about the interrelationship between	5.9	5-7	4-7

practice and theory DR is essentially a problem-focused area of study, where students use their skills and knowledge to assess, intervene, and evaluate conflicts	5.2	5-6	2-7
DR in academia is essentially about the generation of knowledge and frameworks for understanding and testing	5	4-6	4-7
DR is essentially an art, not a science	3.1	2-4	1-4

When queried as to what they might hope to gain from a meeting of dispute resolution graduate program representatives there was a broad range of responses as indicated in Table 2. The emphasis was on simply getting to know what others were actually doing in this still emergent field. There was also considerable interest in collaboration among programs to help define the field's core curriculum and set some general standards to help further develop and refine it 2.

Table 2

Meeting Goals	Average Score	Central 50% of Responses	Range of Responses
Increased knowledge of other program's practices	6.1	6-7	3-7
Articulation of major issues in the field	5.7	5-7	3-7
Identification of areas for further collaboration	5.7	5-7	4-7
Articulation of core curriculum for DR programs	5.3	4-6	3-7
Identification of resources in need of development	4.8	4-6	1-7
Statement of basic standards for graduate programs	4.4	3-6	1-7
Laying the groundwork for future meeting every year or two	4.3	3-6	2-7
Ongoing organization of graduate DR programs	4.0	3-5	2-6
Time for stepping back and reflecting on practice	3.8	3-5	1-6

Core skills and knowledge areas

To get at the very essence of the academic enterprise, participants were asked to identify and then rank the core skill competencies students should take away from masters-level programs 3. As seen in Table 3, the list of core essential skills indicates a shift away from the labor relations,

arbitration-oriented emphasis found in Wehr's 1986 study. In the current survey, mediation skills are listed as most important, and while arbitration skills are still mentioned, they are ranked last out of a group of 19. Negotiation appears in the group of skills considered second in importance only to mediation.

Table 3

Core skill areas for Masters-level students	Average Score	Central 50% of Responses	Range of Responses
Mediation skills and procedures	6.4	6-7	5-7
Conflict assessment	6.3	6-7	5-7
Communication skills - listening/assertion	6.3	5-7	4-7
Ethical sensitivity	6.3	6-7	5-7
Negotiation (distributive and integrative)	6.3	5-7	5-7
Creative thinking/problem-solving/decision-making	6.2	6-7	4-7
Critical thinking	6.0	6-7	3-7
Communication - written (basic and scholarly papers)	5.7	5-6	4-7
Application of DR theories in particular contexts	5.6	5-6	4-7
Understanding of full range of DR theories	5.6	5-6	4-7
Group facilitation	5.2	4-6	4-6
Understanding the use of social science research	5.1	4-6	1-7
DR systems design principles	5.0	4-6	2-7
Self-knowledge (self-awareness)	4.9	4-6	2-7
Mastery of a specific subject area specialization	4.9	4-6	3-7
Working in teams	4.8	4-6	2-6
Research design, data gathering and analysis	4.5	4-5	2-7
Basic understanding of the legal system	4.2	3-5	3-6
Arbitration, adjudicatory skills	3.7	3-5	1-5

In addition to skills, study participants were asked to identify essential areas of content knowledge that graduate students should master. The 12 areas most highly rated are listed in Table 4, out of a total of 28 areas identified. The diversity of areas identified is perhaps not surprising, given the interdisciplinary nature of the field, and the wide range of academic backgrounds study participants came from. Knowledge about the Labor-management area, which was the most common area of emphasis in Wehr's study, was listed as important by respondents, but was not

highly ranked, at number 22 out of 28. Game theory, another key area of research and theorizing in the early days of the conflict resolution field, is also mentioned, but is listed last out of 28.

Table 4

Essential areas of knowledge for students in DR (top 12 out of 28 mentioned)

Essential areas of Knowledge	Average Score	Central 50% of Responses	Range of Responses
Continuum of methods for addressing conflict	6.6	6-7	5-7
Ethics	6.4	6-7	4-7
Negotiation theory	6.4	6-7	4-7
Problem-solving methods	6.3	6-7	5-7
Power issues	6.2	6-7	4-7
Range of mediation models	6.1	6-7	4-7
Competition/cooperation theories	6.0	5-7	4-7
Cross-cultural: gender, age, race, class	5.8	5-7	1-7
Dispute system design	5.6	5-7	2-7
Social psychology/group dynamics	5.5	4-7	3-7
Sociology of conflict/social institutions	5.4	4-7	3-7
Communication, language, persuasion, debate	5.4	5-6	3-7

Participants were asked to list readings that they felt were essential for students in the field. The entire combined list was then reviewed and rated by all participants, resulting in a ranked list of suggested readings. While the rating of the list is biased based on how well known a book is, the list does provide an interesting glimpse at works that are currently seen as central to the field. The top 25 books of a much longer list of books and articles [4](#) is presented below in descending order of ranked importance.

Top 25 essential readings

(Books, in descending order of ranked importance)

Getting to Yes; Fisher, Ury and Patton (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1981)

The Mediation Process; Moore, C. (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1986)

The Promise of Mediation; Bush and Folger (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1994)

Social Conflict: Escalation, Stalemate and Settlement; Rubin, Pruitt and Kim (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1994)

The Art and Science of Negotiation; Raiffa, H. (Cambridge: Kelknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1982)

Getting Disputes Resolved; Ury, Brett, and Goldberg. (San -Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1988)

The Resolution of Conflict; Deutsch (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1973)

When Talk Works: Profiles of Mediators; ed by Kolb (San-Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1994)

Negotiation Theory and Practice; ed by Breslin and Rubin (Cambridge: Program on Negotiation at Harvard Law School, 1995)

Dispute Resolution; Goldberg, S. B, Green, E. and Sander, F. (Boston: Little, Brown, 1985)

Mediation Research; Kressel & Pruitt (San-Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1989)

Getting Past No; by Ury, W. (New York: Bantam Books, 1991)

The Manager as Negotiator; Lax and Sebenius (New York: Free Press, Collier Macmillian, 1989)

The Functions of Social Conflict; Coser (Glenco: Free Press, 1956)
 Negotiating Rationally; Bazerman and Neale. (New York: Maxwell Macmillian, 1992)
 Breaking the Impasse; Susskind & Cruikshank (New York: Basic Books, 1987)
 Negotiation; by Lewicki and Litterer (Homewood: R.D.Irwin, 1985)
 Mediation: A Comprehensive Guide; Folberg, J and Taylor, A. (San-Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1984)
 The Mediators; Kolb (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1983)
 Conflict: Resolution and Provention; Burton, J. W. (NY: St. Martin's Press, 1990)
 The Evolution of Cooperation; Axelrod (New York: Basic Books, 1984)
 The Skilled Facilitator; Schwartz (San-Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1994)
 The Sociology of Social Conflicts; Kriesberg (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1973)
 The Culture of Conflict; Ross, M. H. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993)
 Disputes & Negotiations: A Cross-Cultural Perspective; Gulliver, P.H. (NY: Academic Press, 1979)

In terms of becoming a discipline with its own body of knowledge, the increasing amount of scholarly writing on dispute resolution is quite encouraging. In addition to books, survey participants also listed and then ranked the journals that they used and felt were central to the field. Table 5 presents their final ranked list.

Table 5

Essential Journals

Rate the following previously identified journals according to their importance to the DR field

Journal	Average Score	Central 50% of Responses	Range of Responses
Negotiation Journal	6.4	6-7	6-7
Mediation Quarterly	6.0	6-6	5-7
Journal of Conflict Resolution	5.6	5-6	3-7
International Journal of Conflict Management	5.4	4-6	4-7
Peace and Change	5.2	5-6	4-7
Journal of Social Issues	5.1	4-6	4-7
Missouri Journal of Dispute Resolution	4.7	4-6	3-6
Journal of Dispute Resolution (Ohio)	4.6	4-5	3-6
Law and Society Review	4.5	4-5	2-7
Family and Conciliation Courts Review	3.3	3-4	1-6

Pedagogical Issues

As an applied field that is attempting to focus both on theory and practice, graduate dispute resolution programs are engaged in the challenge of developing and refining methods of instruction that will meet the needs of a diverse group of students working in a wide range of practice areas. Survey participants were asked to identify some of the common pedagogical challenges that are faced by emergent dispute resolution programs. Table 6 presents the list they

identified. As you will see, the primary concern is helping students develop critical thinking skills, rather than simply mastering and applying a rigid set of intervention techniques. Also interesting to note is the concern mentioned over finding faculty qualified to teach in such an interdisciplinary field as dispute resolution. Most faculty currently active in the field were trained in a single discipline, and approach dispute resolution from that disciplinary perspective. As more doctoral students graduate from Ph.D. programs emphasizing dispute resolution, a more truly interdisciplinary faculty base for dispute resolution should emerge.

Table 6

(Note: 1 means not at all important, and 7 means extremely important)

Pedagogical concerns for quality DR graduate programs	Average Score	Central 50% of Responses	Range of Responses
Developing critical thinkers	6.4	6-7	5-7
Identifying and teaching core skills needed for DR	6.2	6-7	3-7
Evaluating student skill acquisition	6.1	6-7	5-7
Evaluating student knowledge acquisition	6.0	6-7	2-7
Developing and mastering appropriate methods of instruction (role-plays, case studies, participatory learning, video and computer-assisted teaching)	5.6	5-7	2-7
Finding a balance re emphasis on theory and practice	5.6	5-6	3-7
Finding and hiring qualified faculty	5.6	5-7	1-7
Locating and maintaining actual practice opportunities/sites for students	5.3	4-6	4-7
Developing an appropriate approach to instruction	5.3	5-6	2-7

As Table 6 also indicates, one of the challenges facing programs is developing methods of evaluating student skill acquisition. Most programs make use of some form of practicum or internship as part of the basic curriculum, but skill training is also going on in most other courses as well. Survey participants currently working in a graduate program were asked to identify the methods their programs were using to supervise and support student skill development. Table 7 presents these methods, beginning with the most commonly used approach, which is watching and evaluating students as they intervene in roleplayed simulations of disputes. This area continues to be a challenge for programs, as they seek to impart both knowledge and skills, and most academic programs are more proficient at measuring students knowledge acquisition (i.e., through quizzes, exams, and papers) than they are at measuring and evaluating skill acquisition and demonstration.

Table 7

Methods used to supervise student skill development	Percentage of respondents using method
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Observation and evaluation of students doing simulated interventions or skill demonstrations	90%
Students keep self evaluation forms and/or journals	85%
Student serves as co-mediator or co-facilitator with more experienced practitioner, receives feedback from mentor	75%
Peer supervision by other students	55%
Videotaping and analysis of student simulated interventions	40%
Feedback from real disputants re student intervention in their dispute	15%
Videotaping and analysis of student interventions in real disputes	5%
Use of observation by supervisor behind one-way mirror	0%
Other (site supervisor does performance assessment, faculty internship advisor evaluates student via papers on experience, etc.)	30%

The survey also surfaced a range of general issues facing program administrators and faculty that were lumped under the rather broad heading of ethical concerns. As you will note when reviewing this list in Table 8, most of the statements deal with concerns over maintaining the general integrity of the field as it grows and matures. Of primary concern was avoiding the imposition of one method of practice as the only way. Given the current debates over facilitative versus evaluative mediation, this concern is not surprising.

Table 8

Ethical issues facing DR programs

Rate the following issues as to how important a concern they are for DR programs

Ethical issue	Average Score	Central 50% of Responses	Range of Responses
"Imperialism" of one model or form of practice	5.7	5-6	4-7
Overselling the value of mediation and mediation training	5.7	5-7	4-7
Masking concerns related to structural violence	5.6	5-7	4-7
Underprepared intervenors taking on "big" cases	5.5	4-7	4-7
Neutrality of intervenors	5.3	4-6	3-7
Too much advocacy of DR without supporting evidence	5.2	4-6	3-7
Lack of willingness by			

existing practitioners to mentor new entrants into the field	5.0	4-6	3-7
Too much focus on process to the exclusion of content learning	4.9	4-6	4-7
Inadequate job market for the number of students programs will be producing	4.7	4-6	1-7
Overprofessionalization of the field	4.4	4-5	2-6
Effects of research efforts on participants	4.0	3-5	2-7
Persons of low moral character practicing DR	3.9	3-5	1-6

Participants approached the question of how professional practice ethics should best be addressed within the academic context, as presented in Table 9. The general consensus was that discussions of ethics should occur continuously throughout the academic program, rather than being relegated to one course or simply left in the hands of professional organizations that may provide some monitoring of students after they graduate.

Table 9

Method for Addressing Ethics	Average Score	Central 50% of Responses	Range of Responses
DR programs should weave ethical issues throughout the curriculum	6.7	6-7	6-7
DR programs should have a separate course on ethics	4.1	4-5	3-5
DR ethics are best left to the various professional organizations in the field	2.1	1-3	1-4

While there was a relatively strong belief that professional certification was coming, as you will see from the variety and range of responses in Table 10, there was no consensus within this group as to how it should best be dealt with, and what role universities should play in this process.

Table 10

Colleges and Universities as Certifiers (of ADR Practitioners)	Average Score	Central 50% of Responses	Range of Responses
Certification of DR intervenors will be a reality in most states within the next 10 years	5.0	5-6	2-7
Colleges and University programs would have difficulty setting a high enough practice standard due to market pressures to keep enrollment high	4.5	4-5	3-6

Colleges and universities are appropriate sites for the certification of local practitioners	4.0	2-6	1-7
Graduate programs should support the idea of certifying intervenors, whether or not it is universities that provide the certification	3.7	2-5	1-7
Colleges and Universities would do a better job of certification than governmental or professional bodies due to their relative objectivity and neutrality	3.7	2-5	1-7
Due to the wide range of DR practice areas, certification of competency is not feasible	3.7	2-5	1-6

Finally, given all the energy put into preparing students for conflict intervention work, a central concern of new ADR programs was the type of job market that exists for students of the field. Most programs have a professional orientation. Table 11 presents a list of belief statements from the Delphi group on this topic. The statements were rated in a manner suggesting that students of dispute resolution will need to be entrepreneurial in carving out new roles within existing structures. Some of the older academic programs are now beginning to track their graduates as they move through the workforce, which should provide us with more concrete data on this important area in the future. This kind of research will be quite important as we look to see if the skills and content taught by programs is actually what students need when they get out in the field.

Table 11

Job opportunities for DR graduates	Average Score	Central 50% of Responses	Range of Responses
Most jobs for DR students will be within existing professions that are modifying their practices using DR concepts	6.0	5-7	4-7
The number of people interested in doing DR is greater than the opportunities to practice it	5.3	4-6	2-7
The DR job field is wide open for all students with an entrepreneurial spirit, creativity, and patience	4.5	4-5	3-7
There are few if any distinct careers for DR students	3.9	3-5	2-6

Conclusion

The field of graduate studies in dispute resolution is growing rapidly, and student interest in the programs seems high. As the amount of research, specialized knowledge and distinct practice areas in the field continues to expand, it becomes harder and harder for aspiring dispute resolvers to learn all they need to know through self-study or mentoring. Thus, it appears that graduate level

dispute resolution programs will inevitably become an important site for the training of new dispute resolvers.

As a truly interdisciplinary area, dispute resolution programs face the ongoing challenge of integrating knowledge and concepts from a wide range of disciplines and practice areas, while at the same time developing their own identity and point of view on conflicts and conflict management approaches. The Delphi study results presented here help to define the current contours of the field, and to highlight some of the changes in the study of dispute resolution since the mid-1980's. More research is needed on the types of students going into the field, the kind of skills they most need to be successful, and the best practices for teaching dispute resolution approaches. While there is some interest in establishing basic standards for graduate programs in dispute resolution, it seems prudent to avoid overly rigid standards and support the continued proliferation of diverse program designs as we study what works and for whom and for what type of practice. Hopefully the collaborative spirit evidenced by the graduate programs representatives up to this point will continue, and the sharing of knowledge, approaches, and challenges will continue to enhance the development of the field.

Notes

The author would like to thank all of the Delphi survey participants for their willingness to share their ideas and opinions so freely, and for their willingness to participate in multiple rounds of surveying.

1. The author thanks Loreleigh Keashly and John Lande for their assistance in summarizing the large number of comments made by Delphi study participants, and Loreleigh Keashly for her assistance getting the mainframe to properly run the statistics for the study.
2. While information on proposed program standards was gathered, it is not presented here, as it is beyond the scope of this article.
3. This was also done for doctoral programs, but is not reported here due to the relatively small number of doctoral programs currently in existence.
4. The complete reading list is available at the Campus Mediation Resources Web.

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