

# **How Class Participants View the Impact of ILSR Arbitration Conferences and How They Assess the Value or Outcome of Certain Arbitration Conferences**

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## **Introduction**

In 2001 and 2002, the West Virginia University Extension Service's Institute for Labor Studies and Research hosted national Arbitration Conferences. Prior to 2001, West Virginia University's Institute for Labor Studies (ILSR) had not held an arbitration conference of this type before. The conferences were specifically designed for union advocates regardless of experience levels. Although these conferences were held in the state of West Virginia they were national in scope. For example, there were participants representing myriad unions from the states of Indiana, Illinois, Ohio, Maryland, Kentucky, Pennsylvania, as well as from West Virginia attending the Conferences. These conferences took place at the Lakeview Resort in Morgantown, West Virginia, not far from the West Virginia University campus. These two conferences were special service projects that ILSR wanted to provide for its main client, the AFL-CIO. These conferences were designed to be a program that is both academically strong and practically based while at the same time creating a camaraderie and solidarity that is educational and challenging. One of the main goals of the two conferences was to educate participants on the art of preparing and presenting arbitration cases in a manner that would be useful to the participants at their workplace. There were 41 participants who attended the 2001 conference and 39 attended the 2002 conference with each paying a \$200.00 registration fee which allowed the conferences to not only be financially self sufficient but also be a generator of funds for the ILSR unit.

I was the facilitator and coordinator of the conferences and also taught several arbitration related topics at each conference. Other ILSR faculty, as well as faculty and advocates from other institutions made presentations at the conferences. In addition, several experienced and well know arbitrators made presentations at the conferences. At the conclusion of each conference, the conferences were evaluated using a standard ILSR class program evaluation by the participants using a 1 to 5 scale with one being the lowest score and five being the highest. The 2001 conference received an overall quality rating of 4.47 and the 2002 conference received an overall rating of 4.71. From these

evaluations and the very positive comments made by the participants it appears that these conferences were obviously a very successful event. However, Steve Cook, Director of the Institute for Labor Studies and Research, Ken Martin, Director of the Center for Community, Economic and Workforce Development, and I thought we would go one step further by examining what impact, if any, these conferences had on the participants, including examining whether the information that the participants received from each conference was at all useful to them on the job. So in 2004, we decided to devise a follow up impact survey for each of the participants and the purpose of this paper is to examine the results of that survey research project.

## The Survey Instrument

Three other members of ILSR, Steve Cook, Sarah Etherton, and Wil Smith helped me design the survey instrument which included demographic questions but mostly questions concerning the impact of the conferences on the participant. (1) On May 20<sup>th</sup> 2004, I mailed out to each conference participant a detailed letter explaining our research project along with a copy of the survey. (2) On June 9<sup>th</sup> a reminder letter was mailed to each participant who had not responded to the survey. (3) On June 28<sup>th</sup> a final reminder letter was sent out to each participant who had not responded to us with a completed survey. (4) Each of the three mailings contained a copy of the survey instrument and a self-addressed stamped envelop for the participants to use to mail the survey back to ILSR. One participant chose to complete the survey by phone and in all twenty seven participants completed the survey. This represented 36% of the participants who attended the conferences.

## Conclusions

The average age of participants who responded to the post conference impact survey was forty-seven. Twenty-five of the respondents were male and two were female. The average number of years that the respondents reported as being a union member was twenty-three. Fifty-one percent of the respondents described their current role within their union as a local union officer or advocate, 33.3% described their current role within their union as a full time officer or official and 14.8% described their current role within their union as a full time union staff member. Eighty-five percent of the respondents reported that they had played a role in one or more grievance arbitration cases since the conferences. When asked what role they had played in arbitration since the conferences 88.8% stated they had been the advocate of one or more grievance arbitration cases or helped with the preparation or presentation of one or more cases. When asked to what extent the training they received at the conferences helped them in their role they played in arbitration 69.5% of the participants who had prepared or helped present an arbitration case since the conferences reported that the training they received helped them to a great extent, 37.5% said the training helped some and only one reported that it was neutral and none of the participants reported that the training helped them very little or to no extent at all. (5) From the participants who said their role since attending the conferences was either a local union officer, steward, or a witness in one or more arbitration cases 76.9% stated that the extent to which training from the conferences helped them in their role in

one or more grievance arbitration cases was a great extent, 23% said that the training helped some, and none reported that the training was either neutral, or helped very little or none at all.

From the results of the impact surveys it is obvious that the two arbitration conferences had significant impact on the participants. In regard to question number seven which asked the respondents to state whether the conference they attended was very useful, somewhat useful, neutral, not very useful, or not at all useful 81.4 % of the participants who responded by survey stated that the conference was very useful to them on the job. All others answered that it was somewhat useful and no one found the conferences to be not very useful or not at all useful. In addition, the participants reported, in question eight, that the total money their organizations saved on arbitration fees after the conferences, as a direct result of their participation at the conferences and due to what they learned there, as a group totaled \$74,900. This clearly shows improved labor management relations at the workplace with the apparent settlement or withdrawal of cases that need not be in arbitration and this positive action would not have taken place but for attendance at the conferences. A previous research project (6) surrounding these conference participants showed that arbitration fees and expenses are paid around 50% of the time by local unions and around 50% of the time by employers; coupling this fact with question nine of the post conference impact survey where the respondents reported that it cost a union, on average, \$2,600 per case to take a case to arbitration the \$74,900 savings mentioned above not only improves labor management relations by participant attendance at the conferences but also the attendance at the conferences saved each of the parties significant money. The group also reported, in question nine, that as a direct result of what they had learned at the conferences a whopping \$69,800 had been recovered, as a group, by their organizations, in grievance arbitration cases presented since the conferences took place. This is money that would not have been recovered but for the participants attendance at the conferences. In conclusion, the training received and the cost savings the participants unions and employers gained by attendance at the conferences were clearly significant and showed a very high teaching and service impact.

## REFERENCES

- (1) A copy of the post conference survey
- (2) The May 20<sup>th</sup> letter which is the original mailing explaining the project to participants
- (3) The June 9<sup>th</sup> reminder to conference participants who had not responded to the survey
- (4) The June 28<sup>th</sup> final reminder letter to conference participants who had not responded
- (5) Totals more than 100% because one or more responses could be selected
- (6) Etherton, Elkin and Massey. "Choosing an Arbitrator: How Union Members See the Decision Process

