Northern Illinois University

OFFICE OF THE OMBUDSPERSON

ANNUAL REPORT

May 16, 2011—May 15, 2012

Tim D. Griffin, Ph.D.
University Ombudsperson
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Mere words on a page cannot adequately describe the contributions made to the Office of the Ombudperson by Mary Ann Erickson over the past 27 years. Mary Ann retired on January 1 after serving as our bookkeeper, receptionist, secretary, office manager, consultant and mentor. She was the most important member of our staff as it was she who kept the Office open and operating. She was the first person with whom those often frustrated and angry people seeking assistance first interacted. Mary Ann provided support and empathy to them as well as to those of us who had the pleasure of working with her. Her insight, mature judgment, wisdom, broad institutional experience, and consistent graciousness established the personality of the Office and were responsible for the positive reputation it enjoys across the campus today. She will be sorely missed. Her position was assumed in May by Karola Smith whose prior work experience at NIU includes time in both the School of Art and Intercollegiate Athletics. We heartily welcome Karola to our “family”.

Crucial services were also provided over the past year by our two graduate assistants, Amber Michlig and Matt Bauer. In addition to providing direct assistance to students seeking help with concerns, they performed many of our marketing functions, and filled in for Mary Ann when she could not be at her desk. They also helped keep the ombudsperson abreast of changes in policies, procedures, and trends in the student population, assisted in hiring processes, and maintained the Office Facebook page. Amber graduated from the School of Law in May and we wish her the best in her future endeavors. We look forward to the experience that Matt will continue to offer the Office during the upcoming year.

In addition, many individual members of the NIU community helped us to help others this year. Some of them referred folks to our office for assistance and some of them served as advocates for consultees who needed that type of support and assistance to successfully engage their options. We are precluded from naming all of them here due to space limitations and, in some cases, confidentiality. However, please know that we are deeply appreciative of their efforts and assistance.

Finally, we thank those of you who assisted in our efforts to present workshops and seminars designed to reduce future problems and issues. Your cooperation, either by scheduling us for your program or by participating in one of our proactive presentations, is appreciated. It is through such efforts that our institutional community can experience growth and be improved in ways that reduce the number of future problems and concerns that arise.
INTRODUCTION

The Office of the Ombudsperson is the only NIU campus resource that is confidential, neutral, and also serves all constituencies and members of the campus community who have any type of university-related concern. People often contact us before deciding whether to take action regarding their situation and are given information and advice about how they might proceed. Those who contact the Office after unsuccessful attempts to resolve their concerns on their own are given information about other possible options that may help them to address the matter more successfully.

The staff in the Office empathically listens to whatever concern is being expressed. We often provide a “reality check” by discussing the situation in light of what is common practice at the university. Applicable policies and procedures are identified to assist in this process and to help develop available options to address the situation or resolve the concern. Available options usually include both informal and formal actions designed specifically to address the unique situation and individual(s) involved. If options involve making contact with others, the Office of the Ombudsperson staff provide names, titles, and contact information for those individuals and/or offices. The staff often suggests the best contact method and message to achieve the desired outcome.

Those persons who consult with staff in the Office can do so with assurance that their contact will remain entirely confidential. The Office of the Ombudsperson is not an “office of notice.” No one will know they contacted the Office unless there is a necessity for the Office to act in order to prevent imminent personal harm. Given that the Office of the Ombudsperson is independent of the NIU administrative structure, consultees can also be assured that staff in the Office will assist them from an entirely neutral perspective.

The Ombudsperson informs university administrators and governance bodies of broad trends in the types of issues and concerns raised within the community and also recommends changes in institutional policies and procedures with an eye toward improving the organization. This function was performed 45 times during the year. The ombudsperson also gave presentations or conducted training sessions for departments and other groups on an additional 45 occasions this past year. The Office graduate assistants gave presentations on three occasions to student groups. Through these activities we hope to reduce the future number of people experiencing barriers to their academic and professional success.
TRENDS AND COMMENTS

The data in the following tables have been analyzed for evidence of multi-year trends. This section reports those trends and offers brief commentary regarding them.

All Community Members – The number of consultees expressing concerns related to mental or physical health issues has been rising steadily for years. Unfortunately, this trend continued once again this year. While the number of individual faculty, staff, and students with mental and/or physical health issues has increased markedly over the years, the resources available to provide assistance and support to those individuals has not.

Students – The number of students presenting concerns related to academic issues, including instruction, was relatively stable this year. After years of increasing numbers of students presenting concerns related to financial matters, this year’s number in this category has also stabilized. It is hoped that this is the harbinger of a new trend which will lead to a reduction in the upcoming year.

The number of students wishing to discuss student conduct issues rose this year. It is felt that this is due largely to the implementation of a new system of mandatory sanctioning associated with a revised Code of Student Conduct which went into effect at the beginning of the school year.

Of considerable concern is the continuing increase in the number of students citing dissatisfaction with treatment by faculty and staff. As the institution continues to depend more and more on student tuition and fees for its fiscal well being, and claims to be attentive to issues of retention, concentrated efforts to address the behavior of faculty and staff in their interactions with students must be undertaken.

Faculty and Staff – Adding credibility to the perceptions of students regarding faculty and staff behavior is the significant increase in the number of faculty and staff expressing dissatisfaction with the treatment of colleagues, co-workers, and supervisors. More faculty and staff than ever before alleged behavior on the part of other employees which necessitated a discussion of options including grievances and disciplinary actions. Some of the specific categories evidencing this trend include rudeness, harassment, and intimidation.

The institution must establish, promulgate, and enforce behavioral expectations for its employees if it wants to attract and retain competent faculty, staff, and students. We can and must do a better job of developing a culture of dignity and respect toward all members of our community.
DATA TABLES

When interpreting the data displayed throughout the following pages, it is crucial to keep the following points in mind in order to place the data in the proper context.

1. These data represent the largely unsubstantiated and uninvestigated allegations of individuals contacting the Office of the Ombudsperson for assistance. They are, at best, honest singular perceptions, not the objective judgments of uninvolved parties.

2. These data are not the result of a poll or random survey of members of the university community. Rather, the incidents reflected in the data represent concerns presented by self-selected individuals who chose to contact our Office for advice and assistance.

Questions or comments regarding this report are welcome and may be directed to the NIU Office of the Ombudsperson.
# Table 1

**Status, Gender and Ethnicity of Office Contacts in 2011-12**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Status of Contact</th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Female</th>
<th>Known</th>
<th>TOTAL</th>
<th>American</th>
<th>Asian</th>
<th>Caucasian</th>
<th>Latino/a</th>
<th>Other</th>
<th>Known</th>
<th>TOTAL</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Undergraduate</td>
<td>202</td>
<td>174</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>376</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>136</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>125</td>
<td>376</td>
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<tr>
<td>Graduate</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TA/GA</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student-at-Large</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Former Student/Alum</td>
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<td>10</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Faculty (tenured)</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Faculty (untenured)</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Faculty (temporary)</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
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<td>0</td>
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<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supportive Professionals</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Operating Staff</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family Members</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other/Unknown</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Notes:**

- * unable to determine via phone or email communications
- **does not include participants in workshops, presentations by members of the Office staff, or consultations with external entities**

**Policy Development Cases**: 45
**Total**: 736
**Simple Referrals to Other Offices**: 330
**Total Contacts and Referrals**: 1076
**Visits to Ombudsperson Website**: 624
Table 2
All Issues (Primary and Secondary) Presented in 2011-12 Sorted by Constituency*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Types of Concerns</th>
<th>Students</th>
<th>Faculty</th>
<th>Supportive Professional Staff</th>
<th>Operating Staff</th>
<th>Family</th>
<th>Policy</th>
<th>Other</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Financial Concerns</td>
<td>227</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student Academic Status</td>
<td>407</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student Conduct</td>
<td>229</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Classroom Instruction</td>
<td>280</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Faculty/Staff Performance</td>
<td>392</td>
<td>196</td>
<td>101</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employment Issues</td>
<td>87</td>
<td>162</td>
<td>147</td>
<td>108</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Miscellaneous Concerns</td>
<td>378</td>
<td>139</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*These data represent only allegations and should not be interpreted as confirmed incidents.
### Table 3
All Issues Presented in 2011-12*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Issues</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Financial Concerns</strong></td>
<td>Contracts(25), emergency funding(3), encumbrances(37), evictions(2), fees(10), financial aid(58), fines(7), independent status(2), insurance(7), leases(7), parking tickets(5), paycheck(5), refunds(35), residency(3), scholarship(23), tuition(19), tuition waiver(8), other(8), policy issue(11)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Academic</strong></td>
<td>Academic advising(63), academic probation/dismissal(41), add/drop(21), admission(22), certification(5), class permits(3), class scheduling(7), clinical/student teaching course(16), closed classes(3), comprehensive exams(9), credit transfer(16), degree/graduation requirements(37), hardship withdrawal(5), incompletes(19), medical withdrawal(21), placement testing(2), program admission(9), program dismissal(15), registration(29), reinstatement(11), repeat courses(38), SAP(8), staffing/performance review(3), thesis/dissertation(9), transcripts(21), withdrawals(26), other(12), policy issue(17)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Student Conduct</strong></td>
<td>Academic misconduct(21), alcohol(15), assault(17), battery(8), classroom disruption(5), deceitfulness(9), discrimination(4), due process(20), harassment(25), hazing(3), intimidation(17), judicial system(64), residence hall misconduct(24), roommate disputes(12), sanctions(41), sexual harassment(2), stalking(5), theft(7), other(8), policy issue(6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Classroom Instruction</strong></td>
<td>Attendance(30), course syllabus(31), discriminatory grading(10), faculty absences(5), faculty office hours(4), final exams(6), grade appeals(65), grade change(26), grading standards(33), make-up work(23), personality conflicts(27), quality of instruction(37), tutoring(12), other(6), policy issue(14)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Faculty/Staff Performance</strong></td>
<td>Deceitfulness(56), derogatory comments(99), discrimination(35), favoritism(48), harassment(26), inaccurate advising(47), inattentiveness(126), incompetence(32), intimidation(72), retaliation(55), retention of tests/papers(13), rudeness(92), sexual harassment(1), theft(2), unprofessionalism(118), other(2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Employment</strong></td>
<td>Academic freedom(3), disciplinary action(21), discrimination(5), grievance(25), harassment(21), hearing(1), hiring process(23), inadequate staffing(7), insubordination(1), job classification(9), job description(15), job duties(28), merit raise(2), morale(40), payroll(1), performance evaluation(36), personality conflicts(49), poor supervisory skills(41), promotion(5), retirement(7), salary/benefits(3), separation(9), student employment(26), supervisor/employee relations(51), suspension(1), tenure(9), termination(12), transfer(2), union(3), work schedule(15), working atmosphere(4), working conditions(6), work load(21), other(5), policy issue(24)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Miscellaneous</strong></td>
<td>Athletics(3), career advising(11), commencement(1), disability accommodations(26), environmental issues(4), ethical considerations(67), FERPA(17), health concerns(77), immigration issues(2), interpersonal problems(43), legal issues(115), off-campus housing(17), off-campus problems(50), on-campus housing(43), parking issues(14), privacy issues(54), records retention(4), safety issues(15), shared governance(16), transportation(5), other(22), policy development(85), policy issue(16)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*These data represent only allegations and should not be interpreted as confirmed incidents
Appendix A
Ombuds Staff Outreach, Service, and Support Activities of 2011-12

Presentations by Ombudsperson or Staff

- Alpha Phi Alpha
- CHANCE Orientation (9)
- Dissertation Completion Support Group
- Graduate School Orientation (2)
- International Student Orientation Panel (2)
- Lincoln Hall Stress Reduction Program
- Pre-Collegiate Bridge Program
- Residence Hall Student Floor Programs (2)
- Student Academic Success Program
- Teaching Assistant Orientation (2)
- UNIV101 and Other Classes (12)
- UNIV101 Instructor Panel (2)

Office Outreach Activities

- Diversity Day Browsing Fair
- Employee Wellness Fair
- Facebook Page and Weekly Tips Message
- Holmes Student Center Window Display (3)
- Housing Programming Fair
- Information Display Table (DuSable and Stevenson Halls)
- Message on Campus TV and Electronic Message Boards
- New Faculty Forum
- New International Students Welcome Fair
- Northern Neighborhood (new student orientation) (23)
- Office Flyers Posted on Campus Bulletin Boards and Buses
- Table Tents in Holmes Student Center Café (3)
- Table Tents in Residence Hall Cafeterias (2)
- Transfer Students Open House (2)
- UNIV101 Instructor Resource Fair

Training Sessions Provided by Ombudsperson

- CAHC211 Instructor Training (5)
- Housing Community Advisors Training
- Northern Star Staff Training
- Orientation Leader Training
- Teaching Assistant Training
- UNIV101 Instructor Training
- UNIV101 Syllabus Workshop

Ombudsperson Service/Committees

- Advisor, Huskie Hockey Club
- Affirmative Action/Diversity Resources Advisory Committee
- Committee on the Undergraduate Academic Environment
- Faculty Senate
- First-Year Connections Advisory Board
- Operating Staff Council
- Presidential Commission on Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity
- Presidential Commission on Sexual Orientation & Gender Identity Campus Services Committee
- Presidential Commission on the Status of Minorities
- Supportive Professional Staff Council
- Supportive Professional Staff Council Workplace Issues Committee
- University Council