

Northern Illinois University

OFFICE OF THE OMBUDSMAN
ANNUAL REPORT

May 10, 1999 - May 14, 2000

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University Ombudsman

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The effectiveness of the Office of the Ombudsman is dependent upon on the efforts of all members of its staff. Each of our staff members provides invaluable support to the ombudsman and deserves special mention for his or her contributions and assistance this past year.

During the past year, the Office of the Ombudsman had two new graduate assistants on staff and they did a very commendable job. Brian King and Tara Teesch met directly with more than 150 individuals who brought concerns to our office this past year. I would like to thank them for their willingness to participate in a variety of supportive roles, from answering the phone to giving informational presentations at various events. They are greatly appreciated.

Mary Ann Erickson, the program services specialist in the office, has been a vital member of the staff for over 15 years. As the initial contact for persons who call or visit our office, she handles most referrals and interacts directly with virtually every person who contacts our office. In addition, she serves as a caseworker, office manager and staff supervisor. These varied duties require an extensive understanding of university policies and procedures and the appropriate university personnel available to address specific issues and concerns. Her ability to effectively communicate with angry and/or frustrated people in a professional and courteous manner, along with her patience and wisdom applied in such interactions and with other staff members are immensely valuable and greatly appreciated. Her independent handling of more than 100 cases over the course of the year was a crucial contribution to managing our caseload.

I would also like to express my gratitude to many other individuals throughout the university community, too numerous to mention by name, who demonstrated a willingness to cooperate with our efforts in the resolution of concerns brought to us. Their assistance is crucial to the equitable processes of the institution.

NIU is a community of diverse faculty, staff, and students who face unique and multifaceted concerns. Members of our community often need assistance for successful progression through the myriad policies, procedures, and organizational structures of the institution. This service is available from the NIU ombudsman, a designated neutral party who provides confidential and informal assistance for resolving university-related concerns. The Office of the Ombudsman is independent of the university's formal administrative structure, yet maintains a comprehensive working knowledge of that structure. The office will not pass judgment on the merits of a particular issue, nor can we impose solutions. Instead, the office strives to increase a sense on the part of individuals of the responsiveness and ethic of care of the institution. We also strive to foster and facilitate

communication between individuals and units at all levels and positions within the institutional community.

Persons seeking the assistance of the ombudsman are often afraid of retaliation of a personal, professional, academic, or economic nature should their consultation or concerns become known. Due to our neutral and confidential role outside the formal university structure, people can feel free to discuss sensitive issues regarding their work or academic environment. The ombudsman will listen to concerns, answer questions, analyze situations, identify and explain pertinent university policies and procedures, and generate feasible options and strategies for resolution. This process promotes clarification and focus, efficiency, and a healthy environment for learning and working.

People seeking the assistance of our office can sort out complex issues and develop a clearer focus on their concerns. Clarifying concerns and issues will enable an individual to affect his or her particular situation in an appropriate and positive manner. Clarification also serves to identify the people, policies, and procedures, which are most likely to result in an amenable resolution.

When appropriate strategies for resolution are identified, maximum efficiency is promoted for the individual and the institution as a whole. Contact with our office can minimize frustration for individuals and curtail the unnecessary involvement of inappropriate faculty and staff. Further, the ombudsman can direct individuals to the institution's existing internal means to resolve concerns. Resolving concerns by utilizing the university's resources reduces the need for litigation and encourages the retention of quality individuals in the NIU community. Effecting the informal and internal resolution of cases that otherwise might have resulted in formal litigation is a valuable contribution to the institution which more than offsets the operating costs of the office.

In an organization as large, complex, de-centralized, and diverse as NIU, certain individuals in the community will inevitably "fall through the cracks" of the organization's structures and procedures. Our office has an awareness of the concerns and issues raised by members of all constituencies in the university community. Such contact from students, faculty, staff, and others places the Office of the Ombudsman in a unique position to identify trends or patterns of concern that need to be addressed and to recommend systemic changes for the university to remain progressive and competitive.

Fostering clarification, understanding, and efficiency amidst conflict in a diverse institution like NIU helps ensure that individual members of the community feel valued, satisfied, and respected. Good relations among the institution's various administrative, academic, and service units and its individual members are fundamental to the university's progress.

DIRECT SERVICES

Referrals

Some of the daily interactions with the Office of the Ombudsman are of a simple informational or referral nature. Typically, such a caller or visitor asks a relatively simple question, such as “Where can I find an academic advisor?” or “Where can a student go who needs a lawyer?” Deliberate, active listening and posing questions for clarification may be necessary to adequately identify the issue(s) involved and determine the appropriate referral(s) to offer. These callers, termed “referrals” within the office, are simply referred to the appropriate office or individual authorized to address the concern presented. Usually, the person is also invited to contact the Office of the Ombudsman again should the person or office to which they have been referred be unable to resolve their concern satisfactorily.

No detailed records of such contacts are maintained in the Office of the Ombudsman due to the expense, space and time requirements of recording such data. Instead, a simple numeric tally is made for record-keeping purposes. A total of 398 such contacts were received by the office this past year. (Referral numbers are not included in the figures represented in other sections of this report, with the exception of Addendum A.) Situations requiring more than simple information, which typically includes a more detailed situational analysis and/or the development of multiple resolution options, are classified as cases.

The importance of the referral function, though not extensively discussed in this report, should not be underestimated. In an organization as large, complex, unique, de-centralized, and rapidly changing as Northern Illinois University, even long-time community members may be unclear as to what entity has authority over what particular function at a given point in time. The staff in the Office of the Ombudsman maintains broad knowledge of current institutional policies, procedures, and practices. Being provided with such information can make someone’s efforts to resolve a concern easily successful instead of time-consuming and frustrating.

Concerns Brought to Our Attention

During 1999-2000, the Office of the Ombudsman served the needs of 640 individuals who required more than a simple referral to resolve their concerns. These individuals were typically seen in person in the Office of the Ombudsman, although more and more of these contacts are received by telephone and/or e-mail. The concerns brought to us last year were from 401 students, 74 faculty members, 95 staff members and 70 people of other classifications. Addendum A provides further information about the status/constituency groups served, and Addendum B indicates a numeric tally of various categories of issues and concerns brought to our attention this year.

OTHER SERVICES

Discrimination Hotline

The Office of the Ombudsman remains the unit designated to monitor the “Discrimination Hotline” in order to accept reports of discrimination on the campus. Reports of alleged incidents are received in a confidential manner during normal office hours as well as via voice mail when the office is closed. The majority of such reports are from callers who wish to remain anonymous. Occasionally, a report of alleged discrimination is received at another campus unit and forwarded to the Office of the Ombudsman. When requested and authorized by the complainant, the ombudsman contacts other individuals who have the authority to address such alleged behaviors. While only five people used this service during the year, 162 people referred to alleged incidents of discriminatory behavior while speaking with staff in the Office of the Ombudsman. It is clear that few people are aware that the Discrimination Hotline is an alternative method available for reporting such incidents. This service will be evaluated during the coming year to better meet campus needs in this area.

Consultation with Campus Entities

During the past year, the ombudsman interacted with numerous university committees charged with the development of policies and procedures, consulted privately and confidentially with individuals who were charged with such responsibilities, and responded to requests to critique many current or proposed documents relating to institutional practices. The ombudsman also consulted with scores of individuals regarding issues related to classroom management, work environment, morale, staffing, and ethical concerns. These consultations included services provided to administrators and supervisors as well as to students, faculty, and staff. The opportunity to provide such input during the initial development of policies and procedures is greatly welcomed by the office. Such involvement inevitably reduces the number of concerns related to these issues that otherwise may arise at a later date.

External Consultations

The ombudsman is frequently contacted for input and consultation by individuals not traditionally thought of as members of the NIU community. Over the course of the past academic year, such individuals have included parents and other family members, alumni, DeKalb residents, representatives of DeKalb businesses and city government, as well as other institutions of higher education and corporate entities seeking advice on the development or implementation of alternative dispute resolution and/or customer service strategies.

Numerous universities across the United States are seeking to implement alternative dispute resolution and organizational development strategies designed to most efficiently meet the needs of

their respective institutions. Several representatives of higher education institutions made unsolicited contact with NIU's Office of the Ombudsman with regard to the establishment of ombuds offices on their campuses. Assistance was also provided to two universities outside the United States.

Other Activities/Service

During the past year, the NIU ombudsman remained an active member of the University and College Ombuds Association (UCOA). His activities included the presentation of a session at the annual conference of the organization. He is an active member of the UCOA Ethics and Standards of Practice Committee, contributing to the development of new statements and standards for professional practice within the field. He is also an elected member of the Executive Board of that organization.

In addition to the committee consultations referred to earlier, the ombudsman served within the NIU community as a non-voting member of the Asian-American Task Force Subcommittee on Student Services, the President's Commission on the Status of Minorities, the President's Committee on Sexual Orientation, and the Affirmative Action/Diversity Resources Committee. The ombudsman remains active in the development and delivery of UNIV 101, "The University Experience" for freshmen by presenting at the training workshop for new instructors of the course and by once again teaching a section of the course in the fall semester. He served as a facilitator in the Peer Connections Mentoring Program of the Office of Advising, Information and Referral Services and participated in the orientation and training of the Teaching Assistant Training and Development Program. He presented workshops or training sessions in a variety of departments including Student Housing and Dining Services, Political Science, the "Northern Star," and Orientation and Campus Assistance. As time permitted, the ombudsman also attended the meetings of, and provided service to, the University Council, the Faculty Senate, the Supportive Professional Staff Council, and the Operating Staff Council.

STANDARDS OF PRACTICE

At its annual business meeting in July, 2000, the University and College Ombuds Association (UCOA) approved the first standards of practice for the profession. These standards identify the following as fundamental to the practice of ombudsing in higher education: independence, neutrality, confidentiality, informality, and access to services by all members of the specified community. Given the procedures already in place in the NIU Office of the Ombudsman, only a few minor adjustments will be needed for complete implementation of these standards. Some of the wording in marketing and internal documents will be reviewed during the coming year to more accurately reflect our compliance with the standards of practice. A copy of the UCOA Standards of Practice is attached to this report as Addendum C.

PROGRESS ON PAST RECOMMENDATIONS

Evidence was seen this year of the partial implementation of a number of past recommendations from the ombudsman. Three have been selected for specific discussion in this report.

Confidentiality Training

Virtually every university employee regularly handles information about specific students, faculty, and/or staff that is to some degree confidential in nature. The Office of Registration and Records, in conjunction with Human Resource Services, has held seminars regarding the appropriate disclosure of student data in accordance with the Family Education Right to Privacy Act (FERPA). Such presentations are extremely useful and well received. However, additional generic workshops should be held regularly on related federal and statutory regulations. In addition, very specific training for employees including such groups as academic department secretaries, service unit staff, and faculty is needed. Such training should address the application of broad regulations to the specific sets of personnel and student data handled by particular units.

Point-of-Service User Evaluations

Information regarding the perceptions of provided service can be invaluable to departments in identifying the degree to which they are meeting needs of users. Such feedback, collected from a brief evaluation form provided at the time that the user is engaging the service, can supply this data in an extremely inexpensive yet effective manner. While some offices have adopted this strategy to better meet constituent needs, many have not. In addition to supplying the unit with invaluable information, such a practice also sends the positive message to the person utilizing the service that the institution cares about whether their needs are met. Unit heads interested in implementing this practice are invited to contact the Office of the Ombudsman for assistance in the development of a data collection instrument designed to meet their specific assessment needs.

“360” Personnel Evaluations

Northern Illinois University, like most institutions of higher education, has recognized for decades the value of broad evaluative input in the assessment of teaching faculty. As a result, input from department chairs, colleagues, and students is systematically solicited and meaningfully integrated into the evaluation process. Such an evaluative system provides data regarding how co-workers and/or those to whom services are provided perceive the employee. It subsequently allows the supervisor and employee to identify and design specific behavioral strategies to effectively address those perceptions. Some units have begun to institute such evaluative strategies for employees of other constituency groups since the recommendation to do so was originally offered some years ago. There remain, however, many units who rely totally on a sole supervisor's

subjective judgment to assess employee performance. Adopting a more comprehensive system of personnel evaluation for various employee classifications would be of great benefit to the institution and should be implemented wherever possible.

CONCLUSION

Northern Illinois University has entered a period of unprecedented change. During the past year, the long-predicted rapid diversification of our student body has begun to evidence itself with marked increases in the enrollment of persons of color, as well as a continuing increase in the number and diversity of non-traditional students facilitated by the opening of the Naperville campus and the rising enrollments on the Hoffman Estates and Rockford campuses. We welcomed a new president and have begun the process of selecting a new provost, with the selection of a new associate provost for undergraduate education also anticipated in the year ahead.

To successfully meet the needs of our changing community, we must take advantage of staffing opportunities in new administrative and faculty hires to ensure that the demographic composition of our faculty and staff reflects that of our student body and service area. These new members of our community must be appreciative of and responsive to the needs of our diverse and changing clientele. In order to accomplish this, we as an institution need to do a better job of assessing those needs and of disseminating that information to all units charged with the responsibility of providing educational and support services.

The Office of the Ombudsman is in a unique position to aid this endeavor by providing data related to the nature and frequency of real and perceived institutional barriers to the achievement of educational and professional goals faced by members of our various and diverse constituencies. Our institution's responsiveness to these expressed needs speaks to our perceived level of welcomeness and the degree to which we value the unique contribution and intrinsic dignity of each human being. We look forward to contributing systemically to this process as well as to meeting the specific needs of individuals utilizing our services in the year ahead.

Addendum A

**INSTITUTIONAL STATUS OF THOSE SEEKING
OMBUDS SERVICES IN 1999-2000**

Students			401
	Undergraduate	318	
	Graduate	57	
	TA/GA	4	
	Student-at-Large	9	
	Former Student/Alum	13	
Teaching Faculty			74
	Tenured	50	
	Non-tenured	16	
	Temporary/Part-time	8	
Operating Staff			58
Supportive Professional Staff			37
Parents/Family Members			34
Policy Development			24
Other			12
	Total Cases		640
	Total Numbers of Referrals (Unknown status)		398
	University Community Members Directly Served		*1038

*This number does not include participants in training workshops and work environment assessment activities, attendees at presentations by members of the office staff, and consultations with external agencies.

Addendum B

PRIMARY ISSUES PRESENTED IN 1999-2000*

Financial Concerns	54
Athletic scholarship, contracts, emergency loans, encumbrances, fees, financial aid, insurance, leases, paycheck, phone bills, refunds, tuition, other	
Academic Status	92
Academic probation/dismissal, add/drop, admission, certification, class permits, class scheduling, clinical/student teaching course, closed classes, credit transfer, degree/graduation requirements, incompletes, medical withdrawal, program dismissal, registration, reinstatement, repeat courses, thesis/dissertation, transcripts, withdrawals, other	
Student Conduct	69
Academic misconduct, assault, battery, classroom disruption, deceitfulness, discrimination, due process, harassment, hazing, intimidation, judicial system, residence hall misconduct, roommate disputes, sanctions, sexual harassment, theft, other	
Classroom Instruction	48
Attendance, course syllabus, discriminatory grading, final exams, grading standards, make-up work, personality conflicts, quality of instruction, teacher fluency, other	
Faculty/Staff Performance	90
Deceitfulness, derogatory comments, discrimination, favoritism, harassment, inaccurate advising, inattentiveness, incompetence, intimidation, rudeness, sexual harassment, theft, other	
Employment	94
Academic freedom, discrimination, disciplinary action, grievance, harassment, hiring process, insubordination, job classification, job description, lay-off, morale, performance evaluation, personality conflicts, poor supervisory skills, promotion, salary/benefits, sexual harassment, supervisor/employee relations, tenure, termination, work schedule, working atmosphere, other	
Grade Appeals	46
Policy Issues and Development	46
Ethical Considerations	14
Off-Campus Problems	12
Parking	15
Safety Issues	11
On-Campus Housing Concerns	19
Off-Campus Housing Concerns	4
Interpersonal Problems	4
Privacy Issues	8
Miscellaneous	14

*These data represent allegations that were brought to our office. They should not be interpreted as confirmed incidents and they do not incorporate reports to other campus offices.

Addendum C

UNIVERSITY AND COLLEGE OMBUDS ASSOCIATION

Standards of Practice

INTRODUCTION

The University and college Ombuds Association has developed the following standards of practice to provide a model for individual practice and for the establishment of office policies and procedures. These standards were developed in accordance with commonly understood principles within the Ombuds profession and reflect the core values of the University and College Ombuds Association. Standards of Practice help guide members in making responsible choices and further, they are intended to promote constituents' understanding of and confidence in Ombuds Offices and their services.

DEFINITION

A college or university ombudsman* is authorized by an institution of higher education to confidentially receive complaints, concerns or inquiries about alleged acts, omissions, improprieties, and/or broader systemic problems within the ombudsman's defined jurisdiction and to listen, offer options, facilitate resolutions, informally investigate or otherwise examine these issues independently and impartially. Members of the University and College Ombuds Association strive to practice according to the following standards:

1. Independence

The Ombuds Office must be independent in its structure, function and appearance.

- 1.1** The Ombuds institutional reporting relationship to her/his supervisor is for administrative and budgetary purposes only.
- 1.2** The Ombuds should be placed at the highest possible level.
- 1.3** The Ombuds should have no assignment of duties that would present a conflict of interest to her/his duties as ombuds.
- 1.4** The Ombuds is independent of the units which the office informally investigates or examines.
- 1.5** The Ombuds has the sole power to appoint and remove Ombuds Office staff and is directly involved in staff supervision.

**The term Ombudsman is used in this definition in order to communicate with the widest possible community and is not intended to discourage others from using more gender-neutral terms. In accordance with UCOA practice adopted in 1991, the document uses the term Ombuds throughout. UCOA acknowledges, with respect, that many practitioners use alternative forms of this word, such as ombudsperson, ombuds officer, and the like.*

- 1.6** The Ombuds acts on issues, concerns, inquiries or complaints, or on her or his own initiative.
- 1.7** The Ombuds may issue or publish periodic reports summarizing the ombuds' activities.
- 1.8** The Ombuds should have a set and renewable term or should be removable only for cause.
- 1.9** The Ombuds should have a specific allocated budget and sufficient resources to perform the function.
- 1.10** The Ombuds Office should be established through an act of the organization's official governing body, or in written policies, such as terms of reference or resolution.
- 1.11** The Ombuds has access to all relevant sources of information.

2. Impartiality/Neutrality

The Ombuds is neutral, impartial, unaligned and objective.

- 2.1** The Ombuds has no personal interest or stake in and incurs no personal gain or loss from the outcome of an issue.
- 2.2** The Ombuds avoids situations, which may cause or result in conflicts of interest for the Ombuds.
- 2.3** The Ombuds is an advocate for good and fair process, not an advocate on behalf of individuals or the institution.
- 2.4** The Ombuds acts in consideration of and with respect for the legitimate interests and concerns of all affected parties
- 2.5** The Ombuds may recommend and advocate for responsible and appropriate systems change.
- 2.6** The Ombuds may bring to the attention of appropriate parties any policies, programs, personnel matters, or institutional practices or decisions, which affect persons' health, safety or rights.

3. Confidentiality

The Ombuds must not disclose and must not be required to disclose any information provided in confidence, except to address an imminent risk of serious harm where there is no other responsible option.

- 3.1** The Ombuds has no personal interest or stake in and incurs no personal gain or loss from the outcome of an issue.
- 3.2** The Ombuds avoids situations, which may cause or result in conflicts of interest for the Ombuds.
- 3.3** The Ombuds is an advocate for good and fair process, not an advocate on behalf of individuals or the institution.
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- 3.9** The Ombuds acts in consideration of and with respect for the legitimate interests and concerns of all affected parties
- 3.10** The Ombuds may recommend and advocate for responsible and appropriate systems change.
- 3.11** The Ombuds has no personal interest or stake in and incurs no personal gain or loss from the outcome of an issue.

4. Informality

The Ombuds functions on an informal basis by such means as: listening, providing and receiving information, reframing issues, developing options, referral, third party intervention, shuttle diplomacy, mediation, and systems change.

- 4.1** The Ombuds does not take an active role in any formal institutional investigative or adjudicative procedures, but may informally investigate or otherwise examine alleged procedural irregularities of a formal process.
- 4.2** The Ombuds supplements, but does not replace, any steps required in formal internal or external procedures. Use of the Ombuds office is not a required step in any grievance process or organizational policy.
- 4.3** The Ombuds hears and considers the concerns, issues, perceptions, interpretations, facts, and/or allegations of inappropriate acts, omissions, or improprieties presented by individuals.
- 4.4** The Ombuds may conduct informal fact finding when appropriate.
- 4.5** When a formal investigation is requested, the Ombuds refers individuals to the appropriate offices or persons.

5. Access to Services

All members of the specified community may voluntarily seek services and will be treated with respect and dignity.

5.1 The Ombuds exercises discretion in response to requests for service.

5.2 Individual response to an inquiry from the Ombuds Office is done so on a strictly voluntary basis.

6. Professional Competence

The Ombuds acts in accordance with professional standards of practice and pursues and provides opportunities for staff to pursue continuing education and training