

**Northern Illinois University**

**OFFICE OF THE OMBUDSMAN**  
**ANNUAL REPORT**

**May 15, 2000 - May 14, 2001**

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**University Ombudsman**

## INTRODUCTION

This is the annual report of the NIU Office of the Ombudsman for the 2000-2001 academic year. It is somewhat more concise than has been the practice in past years. It is hoped that this will make the data more easily and readily digestible by a larger number of readers. Additionally, an unusual number of recommendations were made directly to individual departments and administrators this past year thereby reducing the number of issues and recommendations necessarily presented in this report. Previous annual reports of this office provide extensive information describing the functions of the office and important campus issues and concerns. They can be viewed at the Office of the Ombudsman website: [www.niu.edu/ombud](http://www.niu.edu/ombud).

The staff in the office are to be commended for their dedication and hard work. Everyone contributed selflessly to assist with triage and marketing efforts, as well as to meet the specific needs of those who contacted the office for assistance. In addition, special thanks is offered to individual faculty and staff members elsewhere on campus for the attention given to the concerns presented to them by individual members of our community and for their responsiveness to inquiries and recommendations from the Office of the Ombudsman.

A written copy of this report may be obtained by contacting the Office of the Ombudsman by telephone at 815-753-1414, by e-mail at [ombuds@niu.edu](mailto:ombuds@niu.edu), or in person at 601 Holmes Center.

## YEAR IN REVIEW

It was again a busy year for the Office of the Ombudsman as we provided direct individual assistance to over 900 people. While 288 of these were able to be referred to the appropriate office/department or university procedure after a quick analysis of their situation, 620 required more intensive problem-solving and option-developing services. The demographic makeup and the constituency representation of these contacts are illustrated in Table 1 and Table 2 at the end of this report, and the primary issues presented by these contacts are listed in Table 3. The types of concerns raised by members of various constituencies are delineated in Table 4.

Some people who contact the Office of the Ombudsman want to register a formal complaint or file a grievance. Such individuals are informed of the appropriate procedures for doing so. However, most of the people who contact us are seeking broader assistance in resolving a problem. They may be tangled in red tape or simply may not know where or to whom to turn for help. Frequently, the best way to help such people is to give them the information they need to resolve their own situations. Staff in the Office of the Ombudsman listen to people and identify options for resolution. We discuss their rights and responsibilities, explain applicable policies and procedures, direct them to an appropriate office or person, and outline appropriate procedures [steps] for them to follow. Knowing to whom the concern or request should be directed and reducing miscommunications are frequently the most important first steps in achieving resolution.

The ombudsman made numerous presentations to departments or programs including Orientation and Campus Information, the Office of Teaching Assistant Training and Development,

Student Housing and Dining Services, the Northern Star, and the Women's Forum in addition to providing guest lectures in various classes on campus. He continued to consult regularly with campus administrators and committees to develop policies and procedures within the institution and remained active in his role as a member of the President's Commission on the Status of Minorities, the President's Commission on Sexual Orientation, the Affirmative Action and Diversity Resources Advisory Committee, the University Council Grievance Committee, and the Freshman Connections Advisory Committee. In the fall semester, he again taught a section of the course "UNIV 101--The University Experience" for new freshman and participated in the training of new instructors for that course in the spring.

Staff members of the Office of the Ombudsman designed and distributed materials describing the services of the office to make students better aware of the office and its services. These materials were distributed in a variety of places including campus brochure racks, bulletin boards, residence hall dining areas, and other student gathering sites. Staff members participated at Welcome Days Friday Fest, Welcome Fair for New International Students, CULTURES Welcome Night, Open House for Students of Color and Their Families, Student Organization Expo, Asian-American Student Welcome Night, and the annual Wellness Fair to answer questions and distribute information about the services of the office.

Outside the university, the ombudsman provided consultation services to other institutions of higher education both within the United States and abroad that were looking to establish ombudsman offices. He also served as a member of the University and College Ombuds Association executive board and as co-chair of The Ombudsman Association/University and College Ombuds Association Joint Ethics Committee.

During the 2000-01 academic year, the Office of the Ombudsman was subjected to a thorough review by the University Affairs Committee of the University Council in accordance with the stipulation in the NIU Constitution and Bylaws to periodically "review the question of continuing need for the office." As a result of the review, the Committee recommended that the University Council continue to offer the services of the Office of the Ombudsman to all members of the university community. We are grateful for the endorsement of this esteemed body and shall endeavor to continue to live up to their high expectations.

We have discovered that more and more individuals are discovering the options and university procedures available to them to address their concerns via our homepage. In fact, nearly 2,700 "visits" occurred during the past year. While many visitors to this website may ultimately require personal services to effectively address their situations, some were no doubt able to receive a certain level of assistance through this medium. Thanks to a recommendation of the University Council, funding was made available for services to update and enhance our website during the summer of 2001. As of this writing, work is well underway to facilitate various revisions and additions to the site.

## REFLECTIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In recent years, many individual campus offices have taken steps to improve the quality of service provided to our students. The number of students contacting the Office of the Ombudsman who allege discourteous or disrespectful treatment by staff has declined. This may be an indication that such efforts have been, for the most part, effective. Surely student retention has also been impacted. It is hoped that efforts to improve "customer service" will continue to be a priority in those offices that have adopted them and that additional campus entities who interact regularly and directly with students will also adopt such initiatives. Attention to two additional areas of concern would serve to even further enhance the recruitment and retention of capable students, as well as faculty and staff.

Thousands of potential students and/or members of their families visit our campus every year to attend summer academic and sports camps, athletic contests, concerts, conferences, and many other events. Such visitors inevitably receive an impression about the welcomeness of our campus through their interactions with those involved in the direct delivery of the specific event they are attending and also through their encounters with other persons on campus. They often have occasion to observe and speak with other faculty and staff in the course of their campus visit. The degree to which such individuals are seen to be friendly, helpful, and aware of the event being attended informs the visitors' opinion of our community ethos. Even non-personal factors such as lighting, general and event-specific signage, and visible visitor information and maps can have a significant impact on perceptions that the university community is not only pleased to receive guests but endeavors to enhance their visit through effortless and hospitable access to all campus destinations. The effective accomplishment of this will require cooperative and collaborative efforts on the part of academic and non-academic departments across all administrative divisions of the university.

Observing the interactions among members of the campus community can also affect visitor opinions about the potential attractiveness of studying or working on this campus. No one wants to become a part of an organization whose members are not treated with mutual respect or are otherwise not feeling valued or appreciated. This second broad area of concern results in the recommendation that we acknowledge the importance of developing and maintaining a civil environment to enhance our public appeal as well as for reasons of morale and productivity. To promote this, we need to look beyond our students and understand that all of us in this community must be more cognizant of and responsive to the needs of the people around us. We must treat not only our students and our guests well; we must treat each other well, too. The easiest way to accomplish this is to treat others as we would like to be treated. As indicated by Lady Mary Wortley Montagu in a letter to the Countess of Bute, May 30, 1756, "Civility costs nothing and buys everything."

**Table 1**

**Status and Gender of Personal Contacts for Assistance in 2000-01**

<b>Status of Contact</b>	<b>Male</b>	<b>Female</b>	<b>Undetermined from Written Correspondence</b>	<b>Total</b>
<b>Undergraduate</b>	150	174	2	326
<b>Graduate</b>	25	28	0	53
<b>TA/GA</b>	6	8	0	14
<b>Student-at-Large</b>	1	2	0	3
<b>Former Student/Alum</b>	17	7	0	24
<b>Tenured Faculty</b>	37	15	0	52
<b>Non-tenured Faculty</b>	3	2	0	5
<b>Other Faculty</b>	2	3	0	5
<b>Supportive Professional Staff</b>	7	19	0	26
<b>Operating Staff</b>	12	12	0	25
<b>Family Members</b>	8	16	0	24
<b>Other</b>	12	18	4	34
	280	305	6	<b>591</b>
				<b>Additional Policy Development Cases</b>
				<b>29</b>
				<b>620</b>
				<b>Inquires Referred to Other Offices</b>
				<b>288</b>
				<b>Total Contacts and Referrals</b>
				<b>908*</b>

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

**Table 2**

**Ethnicity of Persons Who Contacted the Office**

<b>African-American</b>	<b>72</b>
<b>Student Academic Status</b>	<b>37</b>
<b>Student Conduct</b>	<b>243</b>
<b>Classroom Instruction</b>	<b>24</b>
<b>Faculty/Staff Performance</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>Employment Issues</b>	<b>495</b>
<b>Miscellaneous Concerns</b>	<b><u>29</u></b>
<b>Total</b>	<b>908</b>

**Table 3**

**PRIMARY ISSUES PRESENTED IN 2000-01\***

<b>Financial Concerns</b>	<b>42</b>
Contracts, encumbrances, fees, financial aid, fines, leases, phone bills, refunds, tuition, tuition waiver, other	
<b>Academic Status</b>	<b>106</b>
Academic probation/dismissal, admission, certification, class permits, class scheduling, clinical/student teaching course, closed classes, comprehensive exams, credit transfer, degree/graduation requirements, incompletes, medical withdrawal, program admission/dismissal, registration, reinstatement, repeat courses, thesis/dissertation, transcripts, withdrawals, other	
<b>Student Conduct</b>	<b>84</b>
Academic misconduct, assault, battery, classroom disruption, discrimination, due process, harassment, hazing, intimidation, judicial system, residence hall misconduct, roommate disputes, sanctions, sexual harassment, theft, other	
<b>Classroom Instruction</b>	<b>49</b>
Attendance, course syllabus, discriminatory grading, final exams, grading standards, make-up work, personality conflicts, quality of instruction, teacher fluency, other	
<b>Faculty/Staff Performance</b>	<b>86</b>
Derogatory comments, discrimination, harassment, inaccurate advising, inattentiveness, incompetence, intimidation, retaliation, rudeness, sexual harassment, other	
<b>Employment</b>	<b>69</b>
Academic freedom, disciplinary action, discrimination, grievance, harassment, hiring process, performance evaluation, poor supervisory skills, probation, salary/benefits, student employment, supervisor/employee relations, suspension, tenure, termination, work schedule, working conditions, other	
<b>Grade Appeals</b>	<b>46</b>
<b>Policy Issues and Development</b>	<b>42</b>
<b>Off-Campus Problems</b>	<b>14</b>
<b>Privacy Issues</b>	<b>12</b>
<b>Off-Campus Housing Concerns</b>	<b>11</b>
<b>Parking</b>	<b>10</b>
<b>Disability Accommodations</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>Ethical Considerations</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>On-Campus Housing Concerns</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>Safety Issues</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>Miscellaneous</b>	<b><u>15</u></b>
<b>Total</b>	<b>620</b>

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

**Table 4**

**Types of Primary Issues Presented by Campus Constituency**

<b>Types of Concerns</b>	<b>Students</b>	<b>Faculty</b>	<b>Supportive Professional Staff</b>	<b>Operating Staff</b>	<b>Other</b>	<b>Total</b>
<b>Financial Concerns</b>	37	0	1	0	7	45
<b>Student Academic Status</b>	92	3	2	0	9	106
<b>Student Conduct</b>	63	12	1	0	8	84
<b>Classroom Instruction</b>	84	7	1	0	3	95
<b>Faculty/Staff Performance</b>	55	17	6	4	4	86
<b>Employment Issues</b>	30	12	10	16	1	69
<b>Miscellaneous Concerns</b>	<u>59</u>	<u>11</u>	<u>5</u>	<u>5</u>	<u>55</u>	<u>135</u>
<b>Total</b>	420	62	26	25	87	620