

Northern Illinois University

OFFICE OF THE OMBUDSMAN

ANNUAL REPORT

May 14, 2001 - May 11, 2002

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University Ombudsman**

INTRODUCTION

More people contacted the NIU Office of the Ombudsman this year than ever before. Larger numbers of all constituencies in our university community sought to better understand policies and procedures pertaining to their situation and to identify and discuss options for addressing their concerns. The concerns most often presented to the office involved academic/classroom issues, student life issues, and employment.

The Office of the Ombudsman complies with the Standards of Practice of the University and College Ombuds Association (www.colorado.edu/Ombuds/UCOA/SOP.html). Among their key elements, these standards identify confidentiality, neutrality, and independence as crucial. Consistent with these principles, the NIU Office of the Ombudsman strives to: maintain the confidentiality of all who contact the office seeking assistance (absent a threat of imminent harm); reject all requests for advocacy for any individual (although advocacy for equitable institutional policies and procedures is acceptable and encouraged); and remain philosophically and behaviorally uninfluenced by any specific individual or campus unit.

Many concerns presented to the Office of the Ombudsman had very well proscribed options and procedures available for resolution. Our graduate assistants, Sean Relay and Jim Klein, provided crucial support to the office by handling the vast majority of these concerns from undergraduate students and also by providing programming to students in a variety of venues. Our program services specialist, Mary Ann Erickson, kept our office running smoothly through her outstanding organizational skills and indomitable spirit. She also performed the vital task of triage by assessing specific needs of those who contacted the office and providing them with needed services herself or directing them to the appropriate staff member. Without the services provided by these three staff members, the office would have been unable to function. Their contributions are sincerely appreciated.

Gratitude is also extended to the multitude of individuals on campus, too numerous to mention here by name, who consistently demonstrate a willingness to cooperate with efforts to resolve concerns or conflicts in our community. These unsung heroes of our community, as a group and as individuals, are crucial to the equitable processes of this institution and we appreciate their assistance and support.

ACTIVITIES

Outreach and Marketing

The Ombudsman and staff members participated in a variety of outreach and marketing efforts to inform the campus community, especially students, about our available services. A brief description of such services is included each year in university publications including the graduate and undergraduate catalogs, the Student Handbook, and the residence hall handbook, "Guide Post." The Office provided an article in the "The Northern Star Orientation Issue" last summer and in the "Back to School" issue in August. Staff members participated in "Move-In Day" at the residence halls and gave presentations later in the fall semester to several class sections of UNIV 101 - The University Experience and to other groups as requested. To advertise our services we displayed our revised table tents on residence hall cafeteria tables several times during the year and participated in a public service "spot" describing our office periodically on the campus cable system broadcast in the residence halls. Additional efforts included posting flyers on campus bulletin boards, replenishing campus brochure racks with our revised office brochure, and distributing informational material about our services at various activities on campus such as Friday Fest, the Welcome Fair for New International Students, CULTURES Welcome Night, Asian American Night, the New Faculty Forum, and the Wellness Fair.

Pursuant to a recommendation of the University Affairs Committee of the 2000-01 University Council, the Office's web page was updated in the summer of 2001. We greatly appreciate the support of the Office of the President and the Office of University Council as well as the expertise of computer science graduate student Rajesh Namasani to redesign our page layout and create new links to additional information and resources. The use of our web page as a campus resource increased considerably over the past year with 4,642 visits reported, a 72% increase over the previous year.

Services Provided to Individuals

Many people tell us they contact the Office of the Ombudsman because we offer them an opportunity for confidential and anonymous discussions and because the ombudsman is a neutral party. The Office provides a safe and objective forum to voice concerns and discuss troublesome matters. We make no judgments or determinations regarding either the veracity of the matters brought to our attention or their substantive resolution. It is our position that all reasonable perceptions have value and must be respected if an agreeable resolution to any conflict or concern is to be achieved. It is not unusual during the course of any given year that subsequent communications reveal significant diversity in the perceptions of various parties involved in a given situation. Therefore, issues presented to our office are considered unofficial and treated only as the viewpoint of those particular individuals.

Tables 1-4 at the end of this report detail the contacts with our office this past year and the nature of the issues presented to us. Table 1 indicates the status of those who contacted our office. The numbers reflect only the initial contacts made with our office, despite the fact that some individuals contacted us several times for additional meetings, phone discussions, etc. Table 1 also shows 279 "referrals" provided by staff in our office this past year. A typical referral

is a person who contacts us for a simple answer to a question or who is looking for information or assistance in contacting another office or individual.

There was a significant increase in the number of individuals seeking direct services from our office this year, with the most striking being noted in employee categories. The number of non-student employee requests for assistance rose 75% over the previous year—faculty increased 18%, supportive professional staff increased 104%, and operating staff increased 188%. No marketing efforts were delivered that specifically targeted these groups. Based on the types of concerns presented by employees, speculation that might account for this trend is included in a later section of this report. In addition, the number of consultations initiated by family members more than doubled to a total of 53 individuals. It is likely that an additional unknown number of people who visited our web page were able to access information through that medium to resolve their concerns without directly contacting staff members in our office. In addition to the unknown number of web page visitors, 1,044 people received direct assistance from staff in the Office of the Ombudsman in 2001-02, a 15% increase over the prior year.

Other Campus Service

The Ombudsman was actively involved in the work of the University Council Grievance Committee, the Freshman Connections Advisory Board, the Supportive Professional Staff Council Workplace Issues Committee, and the Northern Illinois Ethics Consortium. By request, he also presented numerous staff training programs for “The Northern Star,” Orientation leaders, and the Teaching Assistant Training and Development Program of the Graduate School. In response to other requests, he gave numerous presentations to departments and individual classes. Other presentations were provided in response to the Presidential Commission on the Status of Women, the Wellness Office, and Human Resource Services. He regularly attended meetings of the University Council, Faculty Senate, Supportive Professional Staff Council, and Operating Staff Council; and was an active member of the Presidential Committee on Sexual Orientation, President’s Commission on the Status of Minorities, and the Affirmative Action/Diversity Resources Advisory Committee. The Ombudsman again taught one section of UNIV 101 – The University Experience in the fall semester as well as a section of the same course in the spring semester that was specifically tailored for new transfer students.

External Service

The Ombudsman provided consultation services to contacts from other institutions of higher education seeking to explore the possibility of establishing ombuds offices on their campus. After completing his term as board member of the University and College Ombuds Association (UCOA) last summer, he maintained regular contributions to the ombuds field through a variety of involvements with both UCOA and The Ombudsman Association, including service as co-chairperson of a combined organization ethics committee. In the fall semester, he began his appointment to the advisory board for the Conflict Management in Higher Education Resource Center located at Wayne State University.

TRENDS AND ISSUES

It is always a challenge to categorize the disparate and unique circumstances of a thousand individuals. To make meaning of the resulting categorizations and numerical data is even more difficult and followed by the process of determining which of the trends and issues presented in increasing numbers this year were the most salient and potentially useful to report. Many conclusions noted in past annual reports remain in evidence this year. These include the potential value of broader personnel and service evaluations, enhanced departmental collaboration in preparation for campus events, various concerns related to racial and gender diversity, and the importance of civility. In light of the recurring concerns presented to the Office this year about the following issues, they are offered for your consideration.

Employee Morale

As previously mentioned, utilization of the services of the Office of the Ombudsman increased this year in all employee categories. This was especially true of non-faculty classifications. Concerns that seemed a part of many of these cases, such as termination and workload, can be directly or indirectly attributable to some degree to the current budgetary situation.

In greater numbers than ever, members of the supportive professional staff and operating staff reported either direct termination or feelings that they were being forced into retirement earlier than they otherwise planned. With a hiring freeze in place for much of the year, many employees absorbed the work of departed colleagues without additional compensation of any sort. A number of these individuals indicated that they had been inequitably assigned a larger overload than others and were subsequently criticized by supervisors for being unable to manage the increased workload. Some allegedly were “threatened” with unfavorable evaluations or, worse yet, disciplinary action or termination if they did not show a marked increase in productivity. This response from supervisors, of course, can result in an increase in stress and related behaviors that can themselves justify the worker’s termination. The interaction between increased workload and termination can, in turn, result in an environment that erodes morale and allows a few unscrupulous supervisors to take advantage of opportunities for selective and unfair retaliation or harassment toward certain employees in their units. Administrators must develop safe and reliable means of monitoring the behavior of the supervisory personnel reporting to them if such behaviors are to be identified and addressed. Among the many ways to accomplish this are work unit surveys and confidential interviews.

The number of consultees who themselves were supervisory personnel increased this year. Some supervisors contacted us for advice or assistance in resolving interpersonal conflicts among staff members who report to them. Others were seeking creative options for addressing various types of workplace situations.

Another concern related to employee morale is more future-oriented. Even in the best of work settings, where there are no unfilled positions or increased workloads and where there are mutually supportive co-workers and supervisors, a predictable morale buster is the anticipation of increasing budget woes. Open and widespread communications from our institution’s leadership

were instrumental in minimizing the rumor mongering that otherwise tends to be rampant at such times and aggravates the situation. Nonetheless, when people are anticipating worse times instead of better ones, there is an unavoidable impact on employee morale.

In times like these, managers can improve the situation by increasing their focus on good proactive supervisory skills. Make a point to be civil and to show your appreciation more frequently to those who report to you. Solicit and graciously accept staff reports of developing problems in the workplace. When possible take immediate action to correct a developing undesirable situation before it escalates into a major problem or conflict. Early intervention to resolve such situations is more likely to allow all parties involved to emerge with their dignity intact. Finally, always remember the Golden Rule.

Privacy

The issue of privacy has been discussed from several different perspectives in prior annual reports. Mirroring a rising concern throughout our society, more and more students and staff members (64 this year) shared concerns about the levels of privacy accorded by the university. With the proliferation of electronic communications and databases and associated opportunities for increased lapses in privacy, we can expect this heightened sensitivity to increase.

Frequent student concerns related to privacy include the public posting of grades, the continuing widespread use and dissemination of social security numbers, e-mail security, and some newer developments as well. A recent development is the institution's involvement to comply with the newly required background checks of student teachers.

Among faculty and staff, privacy concerns understandably involved the access and dissemination of identifiable personal information collected by various offices on campus. Typical concerns included leaving documents unattended or in plain view of others, computer displays that were easily seen by people other than the user and, most commonly, inappropriate verbal communications to third parties, on and off the campus.

Virtually all employees of the university handle or have access to confidential materials, keys to private spaces, social security numbers, student grades, or other information. If we are to address this issue on the institutional scope in which it is manifest, we must provide on-going training and closer monitoring of professional performance in this topical area.

Religious Diversity

Diversity is highly valued in principle at universities including NIU. We have special centers and programs, commissions, and representatives from various constituencies participating in almost every aspect of institutional decision making and hiring. We are conscious of the special needs and considerations of the members of these constituencies to the degree that some accuse us of being too "politically correct." Additional steps still need to be taken to improve and enhance the diversity of our institutional community in terms of race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, and disability; but I have observed in my eleven years as a member of the NIU

community that all these constituency groups have at least grown in size and certainly attained increased institutional awareness.

On the other hand, another type of protected class diversity, religion, is often overlooked and almost never considered or included in such programming. While the number of non-Christians in our region has grown, their numbers and percentage in our university community have actually decreased over the past decade. We would do well to recognize the fact that religious diversity has been and is likely to continue to be an important factor in community cooperation and relations. We should be engaged in training and general communications to heighten our awareness of the values of those with diverse religious beliefs and make a concerted effort to enhance the climate of acceptance on our campus of non-Christians.

Civility

Among the ethical principles which guide an ombudsman is a concern for and commitment to justice that requires individual interests be carefully balanced with the consideration of the good of the larger academic community. One basic requirement for a just community is an assurance that all members of that community treat other people with common courtesy, dignity, and respect at all times.

While the vast majority of our community members conduct themselves in a civil and mutually respectful manner, there were 274 alleged incidents of incivility described to staff in the Office of the Ombudsman this past year. Most of these concerned faculty and staff behaviors that included intimidation, rudeness, harassment, retaliation, deceitfulness, and/or derogatory comments. It is likely that the number of incidents reported to the Office of the Ombudsman represents only a small percentage of actual occurrences campus wide. By any standard, this number is unacceptable.

Supervisors should be aware that people who report to them are, of course, unerringly civil while their supervisor is present. However, this may not always be an accurate indicator of behavior toward co-workers, and particularly subordinates, when the supervisor is absent. All members of our community must be held accountable for respectful and civil behavior at all times. To do less undercuts efforts we are making to accomplish our educational, research, and teaching mission and diminishes us as an institution and as human beings.

For an overview of issues and recommendations from prior years, previous annual reports are available on the Office of the Ombudsman website: www.niu.edu/ombud. Comments, suggestions, and questions regarding this report should be directed to the Office of the Ombudsman by phone (815-753-1414), via e-mail (ombuds@niu.edu), or in person at 601 Holmes Student Center.

CONCLUSION

The Office of the Ombudsman has had a truly prodigious year. Our efforts have resulted in the retention of at least scores of students after informing them of procedures to engage that they didn't previously know existed; procedures that ultimately resulted in their ability to continue their education at NIU. We reportedly improved the morale of scores of employees who, through their consultations with this office, discovered informal means by which to improve their work environments. We helped 53 family members (primarily parents of undergraduate students) sort through campus bureaucracy to resolve their concerns. In other instances, we undoubtedly helped avoid time-consuming and costly lawsuits by providing informal options and conflict resolution strategies.

Counting website visits and the individuals with whom our staff interacted at training, presentations, and other marketing events, we directly touched the lives of over 6,000 members of our university community this past year. While we were not always able to provide the specific answers that people wanted to hear, we were almost always able to provide them with viable options for resolving their concerns about which they had been previously unaware.

In closing, it is my sincere hope that the reader does not interpret this report or any portion of it as evidence that our institution is inefficient, ineffectual, or uncaring. The vast majority of the members of our university community are respectful, kind, courteous, helpful, and quick to offer assistance to others. While no organization of any size is perfect, we have a university of which we can all be very proud and one that, to a very large degree, is supportive and welcoming.

Table 1

**Status and Gender of
Office Contacts for Assistance in 2001-02**

<u>Status of Contact</u>	<u>Male</u>	<u>Female</u>	<u>Undetermined from Written Correspondence</u>	<u>Total</u>
Undergraduate	140	177	3	320
Post-Graduate	2	2	0	4
Graduate	25	45	0	70
TA/GA	2	2	0	4
Student-at-Large	4	4	0	8
Former Student/Alum	16	14	0	30
Tenured Faculty	27	27	0	54
Tenure-Track Faculty	6	7	0	13
Temporary Faculty	1	5	0	6
Supportive Professionals	23	30	0	53
Operating Staff	22	50	0	72
Family Members	20	33	0	53
Other	<u>20</u>	<u>19</u>	<u>1</u>	<u>40</u>
	308	415	4	727
			Additional Policy Development Cases <u>38</u>	
				765
			Inquiries Referred to Other Offices	<u>279</u>
			Total Contacts and Referrals	*1044

*This number does not include participants in workshops or presentations by members of the office staff, consultations with external entities, nor those able to resolve their concerns through information and links provided on our web page.

Table 2

Ethnicity of Persons Who Contacted the Office in 2001-02

African-American	81
Asian	36
Caucasian	318
Latino/a	19
Other	14
Undetermined	259
Policy Development	<u>38</u>

Total 765

Table 3

**Types of Primary Issues
Presented by Campus Constituencies in 2001-02**

Types of Concerns	Students	Faculty	Supportive Professional Staff	Operating Staff	Family	Policy	Other	TOTAL
Financial Concerns	57	3	0	9	4	2	2	77
Academic Status	111	2	3	0	17	3	3	139
Student Conduct	48	12	1	2	2	2	3	70
Classroom Instruction	74	8	1	0	1	1	0	85
Faculty/Staff Performance	53	13	13	12	14	0	3	108
Employment Issues	17	19	25	39	0	8	4	112
Miscellaneous Concerns	76	16	10	10	15	22	25	174
TOTAL	436	73	53	72	53	38	40	765

Table 4

PRIMARY ISSUES PRESENTED IN 2001-02*

<u>Financial Concerns</u>	<u>77</u>
Athletic scholarship, contracts, emergency loans, encumbrances, fees, financial aid, fines, insurance, leases, parking tickets, paycheck, phone bills, refunds, other	
<u>Academic</u>	<u>139</u>
Academic probation/dismissal, admission, certification, class scheduling, clinical/student teaching course, closed classes, comprehensive exams, credit transfer, degree/graduation requirements, incompletes, medical withdrawal, placement testing, program admission/dismissal, registration, reinstatement, residency status, thesis/dissertation, withdrawals, other	
<u>Student Conduct</u>	<u>70</u>
Academic misconduct, assault, battery, classroom disruption, deceitfulness, due process, harassment, hazing, judicial system, residence hall misconduct, roommate disputes, sanctions, sexual harassment, theft, other	
<u>Classroom Instruction</u>	<u>85</u>
Attendance, course syllabus, discriminatory grading, final exams, grade appeals, grade change, grading standards, make-up work, personality conflicts, quality of instruction, other	
<u>Faculty/Staff Performance</u>	<u>108</u>
Deceitfulness, derogatory comments, discrimination, favoritism, harassment, inaccurate advising, inattentiveness, incompetence, intimidation, retaliation, retention of tests/papers, rudeness, sexual harassment, other	
<u>Employment</u>	<u>112</u>
Academic freedom, disciplinary action, discrimination, grievance, harassment, hiring process, insubordination, job classification, payroll, performance evaluation, personality conflicts, salary/benefits, student employment, supervisor/employee relations, suspension, tenure, termination, work schedule, working atmosphere, work load, other	
<u>Miscellaneous</u>	<u>174</u>
Policy Issues and Development	35
Off-Campus Problems	28
On-Campus Housing Concerns	21
Ethical Considerations	18
Off-Campus Housing Concerns	12
Privacy Issues	10
Safety Issues	8
Parking	6
Other	36

Total 765

*These data only represent allegations that were brought to the Office of the Ombudsman and should not be interpreted as confirmed incidents.