

Northern Illinois University

OFFICE OF THE OMBUDSMAN
ANNUAL REPORT

May 12, 2002 - May 11, 2003

Tim D. Griffin, Ph.D.
University Ombudsman

MISSION

As per Article 18 of the NIU Constitution and Bylaws, the ombudsman:

- Assists members of the university community in accomplishing the expeditious settlement of administrative, academic, and individual complaints or grievances
- Makes reports and recommendations to the president concerning complaints or grievances for which no remedy has been found
- Reports annually to the University Council regarding the operation of the ombudsman's office

WHO WE ARE

Located in Room 601 of the Holmes Student Center, the Office of the Ombudsman is staffed by the Ombudsman (Dr. Tim Griffin), one program services specialist (Mary Ann Erickson), and two graduate assistants (James Klein and Ryan Tyrrell). We are neutral parties who provide information and advice to help resolve university-related concerns as appropriately and efficiently as possible. We serve all members of the university community.

WHAT WE DO

- Maintain neutrality
- Maintain confidentiality (except in instances of imminent personal harm)
- Demonstrate respect for all individuals
- Listen non-judgmentally
- Answer questions
- Analyze situations
- Explain university policies and procedures
- Provide information and advice
- Help people understand their rights and responsibilities
- Develop options for resolving concerns
- Help untangle bureaucratic red tape
- Suggest appropriate referrals
- Assist in pursuing a resolution
- Apprise administration of significant trends
- Recommend changes in policies and procedures
- Give presentations on the services of the office and other special topics (including civility, classroom management, rights and responsibilities, expressed needs of special groups) as requested

WHAT WE DO NOT DO

- Advocate for a specific outcome in an individual's situation
- Make binding decisions
- Evaluate a student's academic performance or an employee's work performance
- Act as part of or substitute for a formal process
- Provide legal advice
- Receive official notice on behalf of the university
- Guarantee or predict specific outcomes in particular cases
- Influence the outcome of a particular case
- Maintain official records

OUTREACH ACTIVITIES AND OTHER SERVICE

Our outreach activities to inform the university community about our services included staff participation at Move-In Day, New Student Welcome Days, and a multitude of various organizational fairs and expo events on campus. We also gave presentations to various student groups throughout the year, distributed office materials at display tables at various campus locations and through other campus venues, and provided information about our services to TV-8 and "The Northern Star." The ombudsman routinely attended meetings of the Faculty Senate, Operating Staff Council, Supportive Professional Staff Council, University Council, and was an active member of the Affirmative Action/Diversity Resources Advisory Committee, the President's Commission on Sexual Orientation, the President's Commission on the Status of Minorities, and the Northern Illinois Ethics Consortium.

The ombudsman is a member of the University 101 Advisory Board and assists with the orientation of instructors for the University 101 Freshman Experience course. He taught a section of UNIV 101 for freshman in the fall semester and a section for transfer students in the spring. By request, he presented staff training programs for "The Northern Star," summer orientation leaders, and the Teaching Assistant Training and Development Program and gave numerous presentations to departments and individual classes throughout the year.

Other professional activities of the ombudsman are associated with his membership in the University and College Ombuds Association (UCOA), The Ombudsman Association (TOA) and other professional associations. He serves as chair of the joint TOA/UCOA Research Committee, co-chair of the TOA/UCOA Ethics Committee, and is a member of the TOA/UCOA Effectiveness Committee and the UCOA Professional Development Committee. He is also a member of the advisory board for the Conflict Management in Higher Education Resource Center at Wayne State University and provides free consultation services to ombuds professionals at other institutions of higher education.

TABLES OF STATISTICS

Tallying data is a sensitive and difficult task in the Office of the Ombudsman. Unofficial records must be kept in a manner that does not identify specific individuals who may have consulted with the office or who may have been involved in the concerns presented. At the same time, sufficient specificity is needed to allow the ombudsman to utilize compiled data at the end of a given academic year to effectively advise administrators of needed policy and procedural changes and to generate this annual report. Categorizing people's concerns is one of the most challenging aspects of this process because most individuals who consult our office have multiple types of concerns. For example, a student claiming unfair treatment by a faculty member may have issues related to the grade appeal process as well as concerns related to the interpersonal behaviors of the instructor.

In order to maximize the usefulness of case-related data, the Office of the Ombudsman keeps two tallies of concerns presented—primary issues and secondary issues. After each person's contact with the office, the staff person involved identifies a "primary" concern from an existing categorized list (see Table 3) as well as any secondary issues that were presented. When we combine the primary and secondary statistics of particular categories, important trends can emerge that might not otherwise be noticed. Therefore, Tables 4 and 5 display all issues and concerns presented by those who contacted the office for assistance.

Please note that the tables of this report show the numbers of various issues and concerns presented to staff in the Office of the Ombudsman by concerned members of the university community. The Office of the Ombudsman has neither the resources nor the mission to conduct investigations to determine the veracity or validity of these allegations. Therefore, data displayed on tables of this report should be viewed as unproven allegations only and not as confirmed incidences or occurrences. The data signifies, at best, a tally of singular perceptions of particular circumstances from concerned parties.

WHEN AND HOW TO CONTACT US

People can contact the Office of the Ombudsman by mail, telephone, e-mail, and in person. Our staff is available from 8:00 a.m. to 4:30 p.m., Monday through Friday. (Office hours during the summer may change when a four-day workweek is in effect.) If the complainant has not yet tried to deal directly with the other relevant party involved in the particular situation, we recommend he or she first try to establish that communication. Open and direct communication at the level where the situation has developed can often result in a quicker and simpler resolution of the concern. If the person is not sure whom to contact, or if the communication has failed to resolve the matter, the Office of the Ombudsman can be of help.

Someone who contacts the Office of the Ombudsman will have a confidential discussion with one of our staff. The staff person may need to ask questions of clarification to best advise the consultee. The names or titles of persons who have already been contacted, important dates of any events in question, attempts at resolution that have already been attempted, and review of documents or correspondence related to the issues are examples of potentially important information. After assessing the situation, the staff person will provide information, such as pertinent policies and procedures, and

will suggest potential options that may resolve the matter. Since the Office of the Ombudsman is neutral, informal, and confidential, the person who contacts us must ultimately decide whether or not to further pursue resolution of the concern and what actions to take.

HOW TO CONTACT US

Staff:	Tim Griffin, Mary Ann Erickson, Jim Klein, Ryan Tyrrell
Phone:	815-753-1414
E-mail:	ombuds@niu.edu
Website:	www.niu.edu/dept/ombud
Address:	Holmes Student Center 601 Northern Illinois University DeKalb, IL 60115

OMBUDSMAN WEBSITE

To better serve our community, the website for the Office of the Ombudsman, <http://www.niu.edu/dept/ombud>, offers a great deal of information for people to peruse at their leisure. In addition to explaining who we are and what we do, it provides easy links to several university handbooks or manuals, university policies and procedures, and other campus offices. It also includes our recent annual reports as well as links to some off-campus resources. The 5,204 visitors to our website reflect a 12% increase in usage over last year. It is impossible to determine exactly how many of these individuals received adequate assistance from the website alone to resolve their concerns. Certainly scores, and perhaps hundreds, of them were adequately served by the website and thus avoided the necessity for direct contact(s) with staff members in this office.

CONCLUSION

Conflict is a natural, normal, and healthy part of any human organization. How an organization handles conflict is frequently evidence and descriptive of its culture. Indeed, colleges and universities should “work to develop a campus culture that encourages values and takes satisfaction in the constructive resolution of conflict. Such a culture is built on the basic values of fairness, respect, collegiality, inclusiveness, and civility.” (Kathleen Curry Santora, *Chronicle of Higher Education*, April 18, 2003, page B20)

Most members of the NIU community are proficient, helpful, and mutually supportive. The issues and concerns presented to the Office of the Ombudsman are admittedly representative of only a small proportion of them. Reflections of interactions with ombudspersons at other similar institutions of higher education lead to the inevitable conclusion that NIU continues to be a generally healthy environment in which to work and study.

Table 2

Types of Primary Issues Presented by Campus Constituencies in 2002-03*

<u>Types of Concerns</u>	<u>Students</u>	<u>Faculty</u>	<u>Supportive Professional Staff</u>	<u>Operating Staff</u>	<u>Family</u>	<u>Policy</u>	<u>Other</u>	<u>TOTAL</u>
Financial Concerns	47	2	1	4	7	1	1	63
Student Academic Status	115	2	3	0	11	0	4	135
Student Conduct	57	7	3	0	10	0	2	79
Classroom Instruction	95	8	1	0	5	1	1	111
Faculty/Staff Performance	62	5	9	15	8	0	1	100
Employment Issues	19	8	13	20	0	1	2	63
Miscellaneous Concerns	<u>83</u>	<u>19</u>	<u>11</u>	<u>9</u>	<u>10</u>	<u>23</u>	<u>10</u>	<u>165</u>
Total	478	51	41	48	51	26	21	716

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

Table 3

Primary Issues Presented in 2002-03*

<u>Financial Concerns</u>	63			
Contracts, emergency loans, encumbrances, fees, financial aid, fines, independent status, insurance, leases, paycheck, refunds, tuition, tuition waiver, other				
<u>Academic</u>	135			
Academic probation/dismissal, add/drop, admission, certification, clinical/student teaching course, closed classes, comprehensive exams, credit transfer, degree/graduation requirements, incompletes, medical withdrawal, placement testing, program admission/dismissal, registration, reinstatement, repeat courses, residency status, withdrawals, other				
<u>Student Conduct</u>	79			
Academic misconduct, alcohol, classroom disruption, due process, harassment, hazing, intimidation, judicial system, residence hall misconduct, roommate disputes, sanctions, sexual harassment, theft, other				
<u>Classroom Instruction</u>	111			
Attendance, course syllabus, discriminatory grading, faculty absences, final exams, grade appeals, grade change, grading standards, make-up work, personality conflicts, quality of instruction, teacher fluency, other				
<u>Faculty/Staff Performance</u>	100			
Deceitfulness, derogatory comments, discrimination, favoritism, harassment, inaccurate advising, inattentiveness, incompetence, intimidation, retaliation, retention of tests/papers, rudeness, sexual harassment, other				
<u>Employment</u>	63			
Academic freedom, discrimination, harassment, hiring process, inadequate staffing, insubordination, job classification, job description/duties, lay-off, payroll, performance evaluation, poor supervisory skills, salary/benefits, student employment, supervisor/employee relations, termination, working atmosphere, work load, other				
<u>Miscellaneous</u>	<u>165</u>			
Policy Issues and Development 34	Privacy Issues 11	Disability Accommodations 5	Parking 3	
On-Campus Housing Concerns 26	Legal Issues 7	Health Concerns 4	Other 19	
Ethical Considerations 19	Off-Campus Housing 7	Immigration Issues 4		
Off-Campus Problems 16	Safety Issues 7	Career Advising 3		
		716		Total

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

Table 4

All Issues (Primary and Secondary) Presented in 2002-03 Sorted by Constituency*

<u>Types of Concerns</u> <u>TOTAL</u>	<u>Students</u>	<u>Faculty</u>	<u>Supportive Professional Staff</u>	<u>Operating Staff</u>	<u>Family</u>	<u>Policy</u>	<u>O ther</u>	
Financial Concerns	162	4	3	12	31	3	6	221
Student Academic Status	382	14	6	0	58	2	6	468
Student Conduct	256	23	8	0	40	1	8	336
Classroom Instruction	375	20	8	0	21	7	4	435
Faculty/Staff Performance	571	51	97	187	62	5	6	979
Employment Issues	118	40	128	205	0	10	5	506
Miscellaneous Concerns	389	54	44	66	48	40	34	675

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

Table 5

All Issues (Primary and Secondary) Presented in 2002-03*

<u>Financial Concerns</u>	221		
Contracts, emergency loans, encumbrances, fees, financial aid, independent status, insurance, leases, paycheck, refunds, tuition, tuition waiver, other			
<u>Academic</u>	468		
Academic probation/dismissal, add/drop, admission, certification, clinical/student teaching course, closed classes, comprehensive exams, credit transfer, degree/graduation requirements, incompletes, medical withdrawal, placement testing, program admission/dismissal, registration, reinstatement, repeat courses, residency status, withdrawals, other			
<u>Student Conduct</u>	336		
Academic misconduct, alcohol, classroom disruption, due process, harassment, hazing, intimidation, judicial system, residence hall misconduct, roommate disputes, sanctions, sexual harassment, theft, other			
<u>Classroom Instruction</u>	435		
Attendance, course syllabus, discriminatory grading, faculty absences, final exams, grade appeals, grade change, grading standards, make-up work, personality conflicts, quality of instruction, teacher fluency, other			
<u>Faculty/Staff Performance</u>	979		
Deceitfulness, derogatory comments, discrimination, favoritism, harassment, inaccurate advising, inattentiveness, incompetence, intimidation, retaliation, retention of tests/papers, rudeness, sexual harassment, other			
<u>Employment</u>	506		
Academic freedom, discrimination, harassment, hiring process, inadequate staffing, insubordination, job classification, job description/duties, lay-off, payroll, performance evaluation, poor supervisory skills, salary/benefits, student employment, supervisor/employee relations, termination, working atmosphere, work load, other			
<u>Miscellaneous</u>	675		
Legal Issues 120	Off-Campus Problems 54	Disability Accommodations 19	Parking 6
Ethical Considerations 108	On-Campus Housing 51	Off-Campus Housing 15	Other 26
Policy Issues and Development 58	Safety Issues 29	Immigration Issues 11	
Health Concerns 56	Environmental Issues 24	Records Retention 11	
Privacy Issues 56	Interpersonal Problems 23	Career Advising 8	

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