

Northern Illinois University

OFFICE OF THE OMBUDSMAN

ANNUAL REPORT

May 11, 2003 - May 9, 2004

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University Ombudsman**

INTRODUCTION

The Office of the Ombudsman provides a unique service to the university community. It allows people to discuss their concerns safely and explore the potential ramifications of addressing those concerns without any formal actions being initiated or obligations being created. Those who consult with the office know that they will receive respectful treatment, honest and objective information or advice, and that no negative consequences will result from their contact with the office. They also know that staff in the office are knowledgeable about virtually all university policies and procedures, and can therefore be approached with any type of university-related issue or concern.

During the past year, over 1,100 individuals availed themselves of these services through personal contact with our staff, and thousands more received assistance via our webpage. While some consultees decided to take no further action after contacting our office, many others were subsequently able to resolve their concerns either informally or through direct contact with an appropriate university entity. In addition, scores of university policies and procedures were developed or modified with input from the ombudsman. Institutional benefits resulting from these services include increased retention, reduced litigation, and enhanced efficiency.

During the past year, the Ombudsman was ably assisted by Mary Ann Erickson (program services specialist) whose skills and knowledge, developed over the past 20 years working in the office were crucial to the accomplishment of our mission. In addition, the services of our graduate assistants, Ryan Tyrrell, Jim Klein (Fall '03), and Jon Hoag (Spring '04) were crucial in making the undergraduate population aware of the office and in serving the needs of that clientele.

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

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

Special thanks is offered to Dr. Carol DeMoranville and her students in the NIU Marketing Department for conducting a study of NIU students in the Spring of 2003 regarding our marketing and outreach efforts to students. As a result of this study, our outreach strategies were reassessed and modified to more effectively acquaint students with the existence and services of our office.

Our outreach activities to inform the university community about our services included participation at Move-In Day, New Student Welcome Days, and a multitude of various organizational fairs and expo events on campus throughout the year. We also gave presentations to various student groups, distributed office materials at display tables at various campus locations, and provided information about our services via TV-8 and “The Northern Star.” The ombudsman routinely attended meetings of the Faculty Senate, Operating Staff Council, Supportive Professional Staff Council, and University Council, and was an active member of the Affirmative Action/Diversity Resources Advisory Committee, the President’s Commission on Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity, 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. By request, he again participated in various staff training programs, including “The Northern Star,” summer orientation leaders, and the Teaching Assistant Training and Development Program, and also gave numerous presentations to departments and classes throughout the year.

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

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 may change during the summer if a four-day workweek is in effect.) If the consultee 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 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, previous attempts at resolution, and 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 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, if any, actions to take.

HOW TO CONTACT US

Staff: Tim Griffin, Mary Ann Erickson, Lindsay Fasula, Jon Hoag
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 a number of university handbooks or manuals, university policies and procedures, and other campus offices. It includes our recent annual reports as well as links to some off-campus resources. The number of visitors to our website (7,575) this past year represents a 46% increase in usage over the previous 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.

TABLES OF STATISTICS

Tallying data in the Office of the Ombudsman is a sensitive and difficult task. Unofficial information 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 and types of various issues and concerns presented to staff in the Office of the Ombudsman by 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.

COMMENTARY

Northern Illinois University has now completed its third consecutive year of significantly reduced funding from the State of Illinois. Student enrollment has increased during each of these years. Many faculty and staff have found themselves having to respond to an increased demand for services while receiving diminishing levels of material support. The reduction in staffing levels through attrition, a necessary response to budgetary realities, has left scores of staff members also absorbing the work load of colleagues who have left the institution and not been replaced. The long term and completely understandable effect of this phenomenon is increased levels of stress and frustration. This resulted in a marked increase of concerns raised by faculty and staff members during the past year (up 17%). It is a testament to the professionalism of these individuals that allegations of inappropriate treatment by faculty and staff declined 25% from the previous year. Staff members at all levels are to be commended for their adaptive responses and coping skills in yet another difficult year of doing more with less.

Our campus community faces the continuing challenge to better recognize the different perceptions and varying interpretations that are inherent in an organization as large and diverse as ours. Accepting other people's perceptions, not merely tolerating them, is a necessity if we are to maintain a supportive environment, particularly for those whose backgrounds and experiences may be different from our own. Mutual respect and personal dignity must be accorded all members of our community if we are to successfully complete our institutional mission.

How an organization handles challenges and conflict is frequently evidence and descriptive of its culture. We in the Office of the Ombudsman are grateful for the opportunity to continue to informally assist the institution to address emerging or continuing issues in a manner that contributes to the further development of a campus culture that values fairness, respect, inclusiveness, and civility.

Table 1

Status, Gender and Ethnicity of Office Contacts in 2003-04

<u>Status of Contact</u>	<u>Male</u>	<u>Female</u>	<u>Not Known</u>	<u>TOTAL</u>	<u>African-American</u>	<u>Asian</u>	<u>Caucasian</u>	<u>Latino/a</u>	<u>Other</u>	<u>Not Known</u>	
<u>TOTAL</u>											
Undergraduate	174	217	1	392	74	17	117	20	1	163	392
Graduate	45	46	1	92	9	14	29	4	2	34	92
TA/GA	7	7	0	14	1	2	6	2	0	3	14
Student-at-Large	3	9	0	12	0	1	3	2	0	6	12
Former Student/Alum	13	10	1	24	4	0	4	1	2	13	24
Faculty (tenured)	25	19	0	44	1	3	29	1	1	9	44
Faculty (untentured)	5	7	0	12	1	1	5	0	0	5	12
Faculty (temporary)	5	1	0	6	0	0	5	1	0	0	6
Supportive Professionals	26	34	0	60	6	2	43	5	1	3	60
Operating Staff	12	29	1	42	0	0	33	0	1	8	42
Family Members	19	27	1	47	2	0	6	0	1	38	47
Other	<u>12</u>	<u>13</u>	<u>2</u>	<u>27</u>	<u>1</u>	<u>1</u>	<u>11</u>	<u>1</u>	<u>0</u>	<u>13</u>	<u>27</u>
	346	419	7	772	99	41	291	37	9	*283	772
											29
											801
											357
											**1158
											7575

* unable to determine ethnicity via phone or email communications

**does not include participants in workshops or presentations by members of the office staff or consultations with external entities

Table 2

Types of Primary Issues Presented by Campus Constituencies in 2003-04*

<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	64	2	1	1	7	0	2	77
Student Academic Status	140	2	2	0	10	1	2	157
Student Conduct	55	6	3	0	7	1	1	73
Classroom Instruction	113	9	2	0	2	1	1	128
Faculty/Staff Performance	48	9	6	6	4	1	1	75
Employment Issues	17	19	23	27	1	0	2	89
Miscellaneous Concerns	<u>97</u>	<u>15</u>	<u>23</u>	<u>8</u>	<u>16</u>	<u>25</u>	<u>18</u>	<u>202</u>
Total	534	62	60	42	47	29	27	801

*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 2003-04*

<u>Financial Concerns</u>	77			
Contracts, emergency loans, encumbrances, eviction, fees, financial aid, fines, insurance, leases, paycheck, refunds, tuition, tuition waiver, other				
<u>Academic</u>	157			
Academic probation/dismissal, add/drop, admission, class permits, 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, repeat courses, residency status, performance review, thesis/dissertation, transcripts, withdrawals, other				
<u>Student Conduct</u>	73			
Academic misconduct, alcohol, assault, battery, classroom disruption, harassment, intimidation, judicial system, residence hall misconduct, roommate disputes, sanctions, sexual harassment, theft, other				
<u>Classroom Instruction</u>	128			
Attendance, course syllabus, discriminatory grading, final exams, grade appeals, grade change, grading standards, make-up work, personality conflicts, quality of instruction, teacher fluency, tutoring, other				
<u>Faculty/Staff Performance</u>	75			
Deceitfulness, derogatory comments, discrimination, favoritism, harassment, inaccurate advising, inattentiveness, incompetence, intimidation, retaliation, retention of tests/papers, rudeness, sexual harassment, theft, other				
<u>Employment</u>	89			
Academic freedom, disciplinary action, discrimination, grievance, harassment, hearing, hiring process, job duties, performance evaluation, personality conflicts, poor supervisory skills, retirement, salary/benefits, sexual harassment, student employment, supervisor/employee relations, termination, work schedule, working atmosphere, work load, other				
<u>Miscellaneous</u>	<u>202</u>			
Policy Issues/Development 42	Ethical Considerations 16	Safety Issues 7	Interpersonal Problems 4	
Off-Campus Problems 21	Parking 12	Disability Accommodations 6	Career Advising 2	
On-Campus Housing Concerns 19	Privacy Issues 11	Health Concerns 5	Other 25	
Legal Issues 18	Off-Campus Housing 9	Immigration Issues 5	Total	801

*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 2003-04*

<u>Financial Concerns</u>	204		
Contracts, emergency loans, encumbrances, eviction, fees, financial aid, independent status, insurance, leases, paycheck, phone bill, refunds, SAP, tuition, tuition waiver, other			
<u>Academic</u>	468		
Academic probation/dismissal, add/drop, admission, certification, class permits/scheduling, clinical/student teaching course, closed classes, comprehensive exams, credit transfer, degree/graduation requirements, incompletes, medical withdrawal, placement testing, performance review, program admission/dismissal, registration, reinstatement, repeat courses, residency status, thesis/dissertation, transcripts, withdrawals, other			
<u>Student Conduct</u>	268		
Academic misconduct, alcohol, assault, battery, classroom disruption, deceitfulness, discrimination, due process, harassment, intimidation, judicial system, residence hall misconduct, roommate disputes, sanctions, sexual harassment, theft, other			
<u>Classroom Instruction</u>	424		
Attendance, course syllabus, discriminatory grading, faculty absences, faculty office hours, final exams, grade appeals, grade change, grading standards, make-up work, personality conflicts, quality of instruction, teacher fluency, tutoring, other			
<u>Faculty/Staff Performance</u>	811		
Deceitfulness, derogatory comments, discrimination, favoritism, harassment, inaccurate advising, inattentiveness, incompetence, intimidation, retaliation, retention of tests/papers, rudeness, sexual harassment, theft, other			
<u>Employment</u>	530		
Academic freedom, disciplinary action, discrimination, grievance, harassment, hearing, hiring process, inadequate staffing, insubordination, job classification, job description/duties, morale, payroll, performance evaluation, personality conflicts, poor supervisory skills, promotion, retirement, salary/benefits, separation, sexual harassment, student employment, supervisor/employee relations, termination, work schedule, working atmosphere, working conditions, work load, other			
<u>Miscellaneous</u>	644		
Legal Issues 99	On-Campus Housing 47	Off-Campus Housing 20	Records Retention 6
Ethical Considerations 96	Privacy 37	Disability Accommodations 13	Other 32
Policy Issues/Development 71	Parking 31	Career Advising 12	
Health Concerns 65	Safety Issues 23	Environmental Issues 11	
Off-Campus Problems 49	Interpersonal Problems 21	Immigration Issues 11	

*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 2003-04 Sorted by Constituency*

<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>O ther</u>	
<u>TOTAL</u>								
Financial Concerns	174	3	3	3	13	4	4	204
Student Academic Status	408	7	7	0	35	4	7	468
Student Conduct	190	18	14	1	32	10	3	268
Classroom Instruction	360	38	7	0	16	2	1	424
Faculty/Staff Performance	435	103	148	91	22	11	1	811
Employment Issues	105	100	174	138	4	6	3	530
Miscellaneous Concerns	325	83	70	41	50	43	32	644

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