

Northern Illinois University

OFFICE OF THE OMBUDSMAN
ANNUAL REPORT

2004—2005

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University Ombudsman

INTRODUCTION

The Northern Illinois University Office of the Ombudsman was established in 1969 to “assist members of the university community in accomplishing the expeditious settlement of administrative, academic, and individual complaints or grievances” and to make recommendations to administrators and governing bodies regarding needed changes in institutional policies and procedures (NIU Constitution and Bylaws, Article 18). Since that time, over 25,000 faculty, staff, and students have availed themselves of the services of the office.

Adhering to the Code of Ethics and Standards of Practice of the University and College Ombuds Association, the NIU Office of the Ombudsman operates independently of all other university offices and administrators, maintains the confidentiality of all individuals contacting the office for assistance, is neutral in regard to any specific person’s situation or case, and is available to any member of the university community. Consultations are also provided to family members, contractors performing services to the institution, local businesspersons, visitors to the campus, and other parties with questions or concerns related to the university.

The office provides a safe and objective environment in which individuals can air their concerns, receive appropriate referrals, be advised of pertinent policies and procedures, and discuss formal and informal options for addressing those concerns. More than 1,100 people contacted the office during the past year for such assistance. These consultations and subsequent recommendations for policy and procedural considerations resulted in increased student and employee retention, reduced formal grievances and litigation, and enhanced campus operations.

In addition to the significant amount of time spent in the resolution of concerns, our office is increasingly involved in responding to requests for general university information. It is not unusual for members of our community to be confused or uncertain from time to time about the appropriate campus contacts to make since the campus may be unfamiliar to them. We find ourselves answering general questions directly or referring the person to appropriate contacts elsewhere on campus that are better prepared to provide the information.

The effectiveness of our mission is greatly enhanced by the support and cooperation from the leaders of many units across campus. The willingness of these leaders to listen to concerns brought to their attention and to explore possibilities of alternative resolutions to policy or procedural limitations is commendable.

The successful completion of the office’s mission over the past year was due in large part to the efforts of our program services specialist, Mary Ann Erickson, and our graduate assistants, Jon Hoag and Kate Horonzy. Their tireless efforts and dedication are hereby acknowledged and greatly appreciated.

QUADRENNIAL EVALUATION

Since the establishment of the Office of the Ombudsman, the NIU Constitution and Bylaws has required an evaluation every four years to determine whether there is a continuing need for the services of the office. This evaluation is conducted by the University Council, a governing body of elected representatives from the student body, the faculty, the operating staff, the supportive professional staff, and ex-officio members of the university administration (vice presidents and deans). The University Council is chaired by the president of the university. The review was conducted during this past year by the University Affairs Committee of the University Council. This committee included members from all the constituencies mentioned above.

The Committee determined that there is a continued need for an Office of the Ombudsman at Northern Illinois University, and the University Council accepted this recommendation. The Committee also recommended that the period of time between such reviews be lengthened from four years to eight, unless an incumbent leaves the office prior to eight years. (In such cases a review will be conducted prior to the initiation of a search for a new ombudsperson.) The University Council accepted this recommendation and voted to amend Article 18 of the NIU Bylaws accordingly. The staff of the Office of the Ombudsman is grateful for the time and efforts devoted to this evaluation by the University Council and especially by the members of the University Affairs Committee. Acknowledging the trust and responsibility associated with this endorsement, we re-dedicate ourselves to continuing to serve the needs of all members of the university community in a worthy manner.

WHEN AND HOW TO CONTACT US

People can contact the Office of the Ombudsman by mail, telephone, email, and in person. The office is open from 8:00 a.m. to 4:30 p.m., Monday through Friday. (Office hours change if a four-day workweek is in effect.) We recommend that a consultee first try to deal directly with the other relevant party involved in the situation. Open and direct communication at the level where the situation developed can often result in a faster and easier resolution of the concern. If the person is not sure whom to contact, or if the communication failed to resolve the matter, the Office of the Ombudsman can help.

HOW TO CONTACT US

Staff:	Tim Griffin, Mary Ann Erickson, Jon Hoag, Kate Horonzy
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

OUTREACH ACTIVITIES AND OTHER SERVICE

To inform an ever-changing campus population about the availability of our services, it is essential that the office engages in a variety of outreach activities and informational efforts. We participated at the “Northern Neighborhood” during daily summer orientation sessions and assisted at the residence hall “Move-In Day.” Throughout the year, we participated in various organizational fairs and expo events on campus such as New Student Welcome Days, Welcome Fair for International Students, and the Wellness Fair. Other activities included presentations to various student groups, distribution of office materials at various campus locations, and publication of information about our services via TV-8 and “The Northern Star.”

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 and 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 (8,736) this past year represents a 15% 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 with staff members in this office.

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, and the President’s Commission on the Status of Minorities. He was a member of the University 101 Advisory Board, assisted with the orientation of instructors for the University 101 Freshman Experience course, and taught a section of UNIV 101 for freshman in the fall semester. In response to various requests, he participated in staff training programs, including summer orientation leaders, residence hall community advisors, and the Teaching Assistant Training and Development Program. In addition, he gave presentations in other programs on campus, such as the Teaching Effectiveness Institute, and to numerous academic department faculties and individual classes throughout the year.

Other professional activities of the Ombudsman were associated with his service 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 served as the UCOA Mentoring Program Coordinator, chair of the UCOA Professional Development Committee, chair of the Conference Program Committee, and was a member of the 2005 UCOA Conference Steering Committee. He presented at the annual UCOA conference and published an article in a refereed journal. He was consulted by numerous practicing ombudspersons throughout the United States and Europe and by other college and university administrators regarding the establishment of ombuds offices at those institutions.

TRENDS AND COMMENTARY

Trends and patterns are important to an ombudsman. They may indicate what isn't working well, what fails to meet the expectations of our community and potentially fosters grievances, causes harm, and violates trust. One of the goals of an ombudsman is to reduce dissatisfaction and complaints. It is hoped that the conditions, processes and performance shortcomings that cause the dissatisfactions will be appropriately addressed. We try to educate individuals whose expectations may be unreasonable or unrealistic, or who are unable to recognize alternative perspectives. We also attempt to inform and motivate the individuals who have authority to address problematic behaviors, policies, and procedures. Some trends may evidence a positive and improving situation. Whenever possible, these are also appropriately noted and communicated.

On 44 occasions during the past year, the ombudsman offered input for the development or modification of institutional policies and procedures. Some of this input was in response to requests from persons engaged in the process of policy development or review. In other instances, trends that were noted from the types of issues presented to staff in the Office of the Ombudsman resulted in unsolicited suggestions and recommendations to appropriate parties. These recommendations typically involve specific university divisions or offices and are presented in confidential discussions directly between the ombudsman and the administrator of the unit. They are classified as "policy development" cases in the tables at the end of this report. These interactions can have a positive impact on the institution's operations in terms of efficiency and consistency as well as reducing the recurrences of such concerns.

Other trends may have broader institutional implications and become apparent only when annual data is compiled and analyzed. These trends are appropriately communicated in the annual report. The single, most obvious trend emerging from this year's data is a 33% increase over the previous year in the number of faculty and staff reporting concerns related to employment issues.

While some issues in the workplace develop from poor supervisory skills, others stem from differences in individual work habits and personalities among the employees of a particular unit. In "Worst Co-Worker Types," L. Morsch describes certain types like the "shirker" who manages to disappear when work is near, the "buck-passer" who unloads work or decision-making responsibilities on others, the "procrastinator" who delays completion of jobs, the "competitor" who turns everything into a competition, the "critic" who disapproves of everything, or the "interrupter" who distracts other workers (<http://www.cnn.com/2005/US/Careers/07/19/coworkers/index.html>). Perhaps some of those types exist in NIU units.

As the result of four consecutive years of reduced or static funding levels, many departments at NIU have experienced increased workloads and/or fewer resources. While it is remarkable to note a reduction in the number of people alleging discriminatory, harassing, disrespectful or uncivil behavior in this year's data, it is not surprising to report that concerns expressed in the Office of the Ombudsman related to morale and working

conditions have increased significantly. It is particularly disturbing to note the increasing number of experienced staff members who wish to discuss the implications of leaving the institution.

The number of students expressing concerns in the Office of the Ombudsman over the past year remained virtually unchanged. However, two trends regarding the nature of student concerns are worthy of mention. There was a marked increase in the number of students citing financial concerns. A larger number of both students and their family members mentioned problems related to paying educational costs than ever before. This is likely attributable to the fact that state and federal sources of financial aid, including student employment opportunities on campus, are not increasing at a level commensurate with student need. At the same time, a considerably smaller number of students and family members alleged unprofessional or disrespectful behavior on the part of faculty and staff than in the previous year. This positive trend appears consistent with the pattern evidenced by faculty and staff.

Increases among all constituency groups regarding ethical issues and legal concerns were evidenced again this past year. These increases may or may not indicate an actual deterioration of ethical or legal behaviors. It is quite possible that they represent an increased reporting of such behaviors resulting from an increased awareness about these topics among the general public through the media and among our faculty and staff through state-mandated ethics training.

Each of our annual reports for the past several years has noted an increase in the number of incidents of uncivil and disrespectful behavior. It is gratifying and encouraging, therefore, to be able to report a decrease of such incidents this past year. To the degree that concerns raised by people contacting the Office of the Ombudsman are a valid indicator of our campus environment, our community is clearly becoming a more respectful one. In regard to interpersonal communications within our community, it is apparent that we are becoming a more welcoming and supportive environment for our faculty, staff, students, and visitors. Hopefully, sustained efforts by the members of our community will demonstrate a continuation of this positive trend.

STATISTICAL ANALYSIS

Information kept in the Office of the Ombudsman is unofficial and must be maintained 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. Due to these somewhat conflicting concerns, tallying data in the Office of the Ombudsman is a sensitive and difficult task. 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.

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. Table 1 delineates the status, gender and ethnicity of 801 individuals who contacted our office for service. Table 1 also recognizes 44 instances of policy development that required the ombudsman's involvement and 274 referrals provided by our staff this past year. A referral is tallied typically when a person contacts us for a quick answer to a simple question or for information or assistance in contacting another individual or office.

To maximize the usefulness of case-related data, the Office of the Ombudsman keeps two tallies of concerns presented—primary issues and secondary issues. For example, a student may contact our office primarily to claim unfair treatment by a faculty member; but the student may also express other issues such as the grade appeal process or concerns related to the interpersonal behaviors of the instructor or classmates. In this scenario, the student's description of the faculty member's behavior would be considered the primary concern and the additional concerns brought up in discussion would be classified as secondary issues. After a person's contact with the office, the staff person in the Office of the Ombudsman identifies the primary issue presented (from an existing categorized list shown in Table 3) as well as any secondary issues that were discussed. When we combine the primary and secondary statistics of particular categories, important trends can emerge that might not otherwise be noticed. Both Table 4 and Table 5 display the combined number of primary and secondary issues presented to the office.

The Office of the Ombudsman has neither the resources nor the mission to conduct investigations to determine the veracity or validity of allegations presented in our office. It is important to note that 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.

Table 2

Types of Primary Issues Presented by Campus Constituencies in 2004-05*

<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	63	0	2	0	9	0	2	76
Student Academic Status	160	7	5	0	6	3	2	183
Student Conduct	47	8	0	0	7	1	0	63
Classroom Instruction	99	6	8	2	1	1	0	117
Faculty/Staff Performance	32	8	7	13	3	1	1	65
Employment Issues	27	24	37	28	1	1	1	119
Miscellaneous Concerns	<u>112</u>	<u>19</u>	<u>30</u>	<u>6</u>	<u>8</u>	<u>37</u>	<u>10</u>	<u>222</u>
Total	540	72	89	49	35	44	16	845

*These data represent only allegations and should not be interpreted as confirmed incidents.

Table 3

845 Primary Issues Presented in 2004-05*

76 Financial Concerns: Contracts(11), emergency loans(2), encumbrances(10), fees(3), financial aid(8), fines(6), insurance(5), parking tickets(5), paycheck(4), refunds(6), SAP(1), tuition(4), tuition waiver(2), other(8), policy issue(1)

183 Academic Status Issues: Academic probation/dismissal(31), add/drop(2), admission(7), certification(1), class permits(1), class scheduling(4), clinical/student teaching course(4), closed classes(1), credit transfer(3), degree/graduation requirements(20), incompletes(5), medical withdrawal(8), program admission(5), dismissal(8), registration(6), reinstatement(8), repeat courses(6), residency status(5), performance review(9), thesis/dissertation(3), transcripts(8), withdrawals(28), other(3), policy issue(7)

63 Student Conduct Concerns: Academic misconduct(18), assault(1), battery(1), classroom disruption(3), deceitfulness(1), harassment(8), judicial system(11), residence hall misconduct(3), roommate disputes(11), sanctions(4), other(1), policy issue(1)

117 Classroom Instruction Matters: Attendance(7), course syllabus(1), discriminatory grading(1), final exams(12), grade appeals(52), grade change(9), grading standards(13), make-up work(6), quality of instruction(6), teacher fluency(3), tutoring(2), other(3), policy issue(2)

65 Faculty/Staff Performance Concerns: Derogatory comments(1), discrimination(6), harassment(7), inaccurate advising(8), inattentiveness(17), incompetence(1), intimidation(14), retaliation(6), rudeness(4), theft(1)

119 Employment Issues: Disciplinary action(5), discrimination(3), grievance(3), harassment(12), hiring process(10), inadequate staffing(1), job classification(3), job description(1), job duties(8), merit raise(2), payroll(4), performance evaluation(6), personality conflicts(2), poor supervisory skills(4), salary/benefits(15), separation(1), student employment(7), supervisor/employee relations(4), tenure(4), termination(5), work schedule(2), working atmosphere(9), work load(1), other(1), policy issue(6)

222 Miscellaneous: Career advising(5), disability accommodations(1), environmental issues(8), ethical considerations(17), health concerns(6), immigration issues(5), interpersonal problems(1), legal issues(30), off-campus housing(8), off-campus problems(20), on-campus housing(24), parking issues(7), privacy issues(12), records retention(3), safety issues(5), other(24), policy development(38), policy issue(8)

*These data represent only allegations and should not be interpreted as confirmed incidents.

Table 4

All Issues (Primary and Secondary) Presented in 2004-05*

Financial Concerns: Contracts(28), emergency loans(2), encumbrances(28), eviction(2), fees(17), financial aid(37), fines(10), independent status(1), insurance(14), leases(13), parking tickets(5), paycheck(7), phone bill(1), refunds(25), SAP(2), tuition(19), tuition waiver(10), other(16), policy issue(15)

Academic: Academic probation/dismissal(50), add/drop(6), admission(15), certification(4), class permits(11), scheduling(13), clinical/student teaching course(24), closed classes(9), comprehensive exams(3), credit transfer(15), degree/graduation requirements(67), incompletes(16), medical withdrawal(23), placement testing(1), performance review(10), program admission(11), program dismissal(11), registration(27), reinstatement(28), repeat courses(44), residency status(6), thesis/dissertation(5), transcripts(22), withdrawals(59), other(8), policy issue(40)

Student Conduct: Academic misconduct(26), alcohol(5), assault(11), battery(10), classroom disruption(10), deceitfulness(8), discrimination(1), due process(17), harassment(17), hazing(4), intimidation(9), judicial system(36), residence hall misconduct(13), roommate disputes(22), sanctions(16), sexual harassment(5), theft(8), other(9), policy issue (10)

Classroom Instruction: Attendance(22), course syllabus(30), discriminatory grading(21), faculty absences(2), final exams(16), grade appeals(89), grade change(27), grading standards(48), make-up work(16), personality conflicts(23), quality of instruction(29), teacher fluency(4), tutoring(10), other(7), policy issue(33)

Faculty/Staff Performance: Deceitfulness(58), derogatory comments(89), discrimination(36), favoritism(52), harassment(31), inaccurate advising(42), inattentiveness(148), incompetence(41), intimidation(93), retaliation(74), retention of tests/papers(5), rudeness(96), sexual harassment(1), theft(3), other(2)

Employment: Academic freedom(6), disciplinary action(15), discrimination(16), grievance(19), harassment(32), hearing(3), hiring process(26), inadequate staffing(8), insubordination(5), job classification(26), job description(26), job duties(34), merit raise(6), morale(23), payroll(6), performance evaluation(30), personality conflicts(34), poor supervisory skills(59), promotion(8), retirement(1), salary/benefits(28), separation(5), sexual harassment(5), student employment(16), supervisor/employee relations(48), tenure(5), termination(9), work schedule(7), working atmosphere(37), working conditions(5), work load(13), other(3), policy issue(47)

Miscellaneous: Career advising(21), disability accommodations(14), environmental issues(15), ethical considerations(100), health concerns(62), immigration issues(27), interpersonal problems(19), legal issues(158), off-campus housing(35), off-campus problems(62), on-campus housing(61), parking issues(9), privacy issues(44), records retention(14), safety issues(26), other(35), policy development(62), policy issue(25)

*These data represent only allegations and should not be interpreted as confirmed incidents

Table 5

All Issues (Primary and Secondary) Presented in 2004-05 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>Other</u>
Financial Concerns	203	3	9	3	23	6	5
Student Academic Status	450	21	10	0	31	10	6
Student Conduct	179	25	9	3	18	3	0
Classroom Instruction	317	27	15	5	8	5	0
Faculty/Staff Performance	353	112	97	181	18	6	8
Employment Issues	103	123	164	208	2	7	6
Miscellaneous Concerns	416	94	111	47	40	63	18

*These data represent only allegations and should not be interpreted as confirmed incidents.