

**Northern Illinois University**

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

**May 16, 2005—May 13, 2006**

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**University Ombudsman**

## INTRODUCTION

In 1969, Northern Illinois University established the Office of the Ombudsman 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 19). 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 International Ombudsman 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 1,000 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, Kate Horonzy, and Kailin James. Their tireless efforts and dedication are hereby acknowledged and greatly appreciated.

## OUTREACH ACTIVITIES AND OTHER SERVICE

With an ever-changing campus population, it is essential that the office engage in a variety of outreach activities and events to increase awareness about the availability of our services. 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, the Wellness Fair, and Employee Benefits Fair. Other activities included presentations to various student groups and classes, distribution of office materials in many campus venues, informational ads via TV-8 and articles in “The Northern Star.”

Some of our office handouts were revised to more effectively increase awareness throughout the campus of our office and the nature of our services. The revised materials included our office brochure, the flyers we post on campus bulletin boards, and the handouts we distribute to new students and family members attending orientation sessions. In addition, a handbook on conflict resolution was developed through collaboration with the Students Legal Assistance Office for distribution to students.

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. Nearly 7,500 people visited our website this 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 to avoid 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, the President’s Commission on the Status of Minorities, the Non-Traditional and Commuter Student Services Advisory Board, and the Women’s Resource Center Advisory Board. 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 various staff training programs including summer orientation leaders, residence hall community advisors, English 103-104 instructors, department chairs, 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. The presentations covered topics such as classroom management, academic misconduct, grade appeals, and how to avoid common student mistakes.

Other professional service activities of the Ombudsman included his presentation of a pre-conference workshop at the annual IOA conference. He was consulted by numerous practicing ombudspersons throughout the United States and Europe, and was also consulted by college and university administrators elsewhere regarding the establishment of ombuds offices at those institutions.

### **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 you 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 you are 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, Kailin James, April Morgan  
Phone: 815-753-1414  
E-mail: [ombuds@niu.edu](mailto:ombuds@niu.edu)  
Website: [www.niu.edu/dept/ombud](http://www.niu.edu/dept/ombud)  
Address: Holmes Student Center 601  
Northern Illinois University  
DeKalb, IL 60115

## **STRATEGIES AND TIPS FOR RESOLVING CONFLICT**

Choosing how you want to resolve a dispute may depend on many factors, including the type of conflict you are facing, your relationship with the other party(ies), and the amount of time and money you are willing to spend. In general, it is usually wise to start as informally as possible, progressing to more formal options only as necessary. Such a strategy increases the chance that a resolution will be achieved quickly and efficiently. The tips listed below are also productive in resolving conflicts.

- Listen
- Try less formal approaches first
- Imagine yourself in the other person's situation
- Be assertive, but also civil and respectful
- Be willing to compromise
- Focus on the issue(s) at hand
- Remember your tone of voice and body posture can speak volumes
- Concentrate when others are speaking
- Ask clarifying questions
- Be specific about needs and outcomes
- Pick an appropriate time
- Acknowledge the feelings and opinions of others
- Communicate about behaviors, not attitudes or personalities
- Aim for mutual satisfaction, not individual victory

## **OMBUDS CONFIDENTIALITY**

The concept of confidentiality is fairly common in our society. Many professions, including physicians, psychologists, social workers, counselors, and attorneys, feature it as an important part of their codes of ethics and standards of practice as does the ombuds profession. Similarly, in these professions and in the ombuds profession, the practitioner is required to violate the confidence of a consultee when it is necessary to do so in order to prevent someone's imminent physical harm.

There is, however, an important distinction between the confidentiality offered by the other professions and that of the ombudsperson. This distinction involves instances when a patient, client, or consultee requests that a practitioner disclose confidential information for some purpose. In the other professions, the practitioner is compelled to disclose otherwise confidential information in response to such request. Ombudspersons are not so compelled. When an ombudsperson receives such a request, he or she must exercise professional discretion to determine whether or not to provide such disclosure. In deciding whether or not to comply with such a request, the Ombudsman must weigh the potential benefit of such disclosure against the potential negative impact of such disclosure on others. For example, if the Ombudsman determines that such disclosure will compromise the safety or privacy rights of some other individual to potentially result in disciplinary action or retaliation against that party, he or she may decline to honor the request.

In those instances where the Ombudsman has decided to honor a request for disclosure, the method or manner of the communication is also an important consideration. Prohibited from testifying or participating in a formal procedure in any manner, the Ombudsman must utilize methods of disclosure that are informal in nature. Private, verbal communications are usually much more compliant with the standards of practice of the International Ombudsman Association than those made via e-mail or in writing.

In conclusion, those who consult an ombudsman should not assume that the ombudsman would acquiesce to their later request to disclose that such a consultation took place or the subject matter of the consultation.

## TRENDS AND COMMENTARY

Comparing current year data with that of prior years allows the Ombudsman to identify areas in which the institution is improving some aspects of its performance. Similarly, the identification of an increased frequency of particular types of issues may merit additional review and potential action. When either type of trend becomes apparent, appropriate university administrators and governance committees are both notified and provided with possible explanations and/or suggestions of potential solutions through institutional or departmental policies and/or practices. The ombudsman offered such information on 52 occasions during the past year.

In addition, 17 members of the university community initiated contact with the Ombudsman to request assistance in the development or revision of policies and procedures. Proactive consultations such as these provide for greater institutional consistency among various departments and also help reduce the number of problems that may arise in later implementation. This opportunity to reduce future contacts with the Office of the Ombudsman is greatly appreciated.

A trend that has continued for several years now is an increase in allegations and questions about ethical behavior on the part of faculty and staff. As in prior years, subjective interpretation of the individual cases leads to the conclusion that this phenomenon is based more on a heightened awareness of ethical matters than on any increase in potentially unethical behavior. A total of 122 cases this year involved some aspect of ethics. Many of these were faculty and staff members inquiring as to the potential ethical implications of some aspect of their own current practice or of an anticipated change in procedure that has been broached in the workplace. Other trends, gleaned from the data regarding the professional performance of faculty and staff, were not significant in the aggregate.

Several trends involving student issues are worthy of note. The number of students expressing concerns about financial matters showed a decline of over 25% this year. While the number of students this past year who expressed some financial concern (143) is not inconsequential, the decrease over previous years is notable. Staff members in the Financial Aid Office and in the Scholarship Office are to be commended for their work with students.

Of greatest concern, perhaps, among the trends from this year's data is a marked increase of concerns resulting from student behavioral issues. The number of cases brought to our attention that involved alcohol misuse, academic misconduct, and classroom disruption, as well as concerns about due process and ultimate sanctions ensuing from those situations, increased from 50 to 200 percent. It is hoped that a part of this increase is attributable to a heightened awareness and enforcement of plagiarism and cheating policies rather than a large increase in the behaviors. Whatever the precipitators of this trend, it is clear that our community can do a better job of communicating behavioral expectations to students and adhering to both the spirit and the letter of the institution's policies and procedures in responding to student misbehavior.

We note a considerable decline in the number of students who spoke with us about roommate problems this year than the year before. This trend was equally evident among

students living in university housing as well as off campus. There can be no doubt that this can be attributed in part to efforts of residence hall staff and staff in the Students Legal Assistance Office who assist students in developing the skills to effectively resolve their own conflicts.

Finally, a word about spirituality. Research shows that individual spiritual exploration and growth at college is an increasingly important expectation both of our students and of the broader society. It also verifies the importance of spirituality in moral and ethical development. Just as it is appropriate for a public institution of higher education to teach critical thinking skills, it is also appropriate for such an institution to teach skills in moral/ethical reasoning—not to indoctrinate students to a particular set of values, but to enable them to incorporate their values in the application of their knowledge. Relying solely on entities that are not formally a part of our institution, such as the Association of Campus Religious Organizations, to facilitate this moral and ethical development process among our students is not enough. We need to increase the diversity and frequency of opportunities for members of our community to explore and develop their spiritual selves through curricular and co-curricular programming on campus. Neglecting to intentionally address the spiritual aspect of the moral and ethical development of our students is an abrogation of one of our responsibilities to our students and to society as a whole.

## **DATA TABLES**

The tables of this report show the numbers of various issues presented to staff in the Office of the Ombudsman by concerned members of the various constituencies of the university community. Unofficial information is kept in the Office of the Ombudsman and maintained in a manner that does not identify specific individuals who consulted the office or other identities associated with alleged incidents. Table 1 presents some demographic information about those who contacted us. Other people contact our office with a simple question such as how to contact another office on campus, and we consider those contacts as “referrals.” A tally of referrals for the year is also listed on Table 1.

Most people who contact us express multiple types of concerns during the course of a discussion. A student claiming unfair treatment in a class, for example, might also express concerns about the grade appeal procedure and/or the interpersonal behaviors of the instructor. When multiple issues are presented, the staff member in the Office of the Ombudsman will identify and tally the primary issue presented by the person as well as any secondary issues that were discussed. Data shown on Tables 2-5 represent primary concerns, secondary concerns, or a combination of both. The data should be viewed as unproven allegations only and not as confirmed incidences or occurrences. The data, at best, signifies a tally of singular perceptions of particular circumstances presented for discussion by concerned parties.

**Table 1**

**Status, Gender and Ethnicity of Office Contacts in 2005-06**

<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	180	190	3	<b>373</b>	51	10	143	16	5	148	<b>373</b>
Graduate	25	34	1	<b>60</b>	8	4	13	1	4	30	<b>60</b>
TA/GA	5	7	0	<b>12</b>	0	2	6	1	0	3	<b>12</b>
Student-at-Large	5	4	0	<b>9</b>	1	0	4	0	0	4	<b>9</b>
Former Student/Alum	6	7	1	<b>14</b>	2	0	1	0	2	9	<b>14</b>
Faculty (tenured)	46	28	0	<b>74</b>	3	9	52	0	2	8	<b>74</b>
Faculty (untentured)	2	3	0	<b>5</b>	0	1	2	0	0	2	<b>5</b>
Faculty (temporary)	2	4	0	<b>6</b>	0	0	1	0	0	5	<b>6</b>
Supportive Professionals	16	31	0	<b>47</b>	1	0	36	3	2	5	<b>47</b>
Operating Staff	13	40	0	<b>53</b>	1	0	42	0	0	10	<b>53</b>
Family Members	19	20	0	<b>39</b>	3	0	5	1	0	30	<b>39</b>
Other/Unknown	<u>11</u>	<u>8</u>	<u>0</u>	<u><b>19</b></u>	<u>0</u>	<u>1</u>	<u>3</u>	<u>1</u>	<u>0</u>	<u>14</u>	<u><b>19</b></u>
	330	376	*5	<b>711</b>	70	27	308	23	15	*268	<b>711</b>
											<b>52</b>
											<b>763</b>
											<b>302</b>
											<b>**1065</b>
											<b>7253</b>

\* unable to determine via phone or email communications

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

**Table 2**

**Types of Primary Issues Presented by Campus Constituencies in 2005-06\***

<b><u>Types of Concerns</u></b>	<b><u>Students</u></b>	<b><u>Faculty</u></b>	<b><u>Supportive Professional Staff</u></b>	<b><u>Operating Staff</u></b>	<b><u>Family</u></b>	<b><u>Policy</u></b>	<b><u>Other</u></b>	<b><u>TOTAL</u></b>
<b>Financial Concerns</b>	39	1	0	1	5	0	1	<b>47</b>
<b>Student Academic Status</b>	142	2	1	1	11	1	3	<b>161</b>
<b>Student Conduct</b>	62	6	4	2	2	0	0	<b>76</b>
<b>Classroom Instruction</b>	78	17	1	0	4	1	0	<b>101</b>
<b>Faculty/Staff Performance</b>	39	17	8	14	5	0	1	<b>84</b>
<b>Employment Issues</b>	20	16	14	29	2	4	2	<b>87</b>
<b>Miscellaneous Concerns</b>	<u>88</u>	<u>26</u>	<u>19</u>	<u>6</u>	<u>10</u>	<u>46</u>	<u>12</u>	<b><u>207</u></b>
<b>Total</b>	<b>468</b>	<b>85</b>	<b>47</b>	<b>53</b>	<b>39</b>	<b>52</b>	<b>19</b>	<b>763</b>

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

### Table 3

#### **763 Primary Issues Presented in 2005-06\***

**47 Financial Concerns:** Contracts(3), emergency loans(1), encumbrances(4), fees(2), financial aid(10), fines(4), independent status(2), insurance(2), leases(2), parking tickets(1), paycheck(2), refunds(4), tuition(2), tuition waiver(2), other(5), policy issue(1)

**161 Academic Status Issues:** Academic advising (7), academic probation/dismissal(26), add/drop(3), admission(5), class permits(5), class scheduling(5), clinical/student teaching course(6), closed classes(2), comprehensive exams(1), credit transfer(5), degree/graduation requirements(14), incompletes(10), medical withdrawal(6), placement testing(1), program admission(3), program dismissal(3), registration(11), reinstatement(4), repeat courses(6), residency status(2), performance review(3), thesis/dissertation(1), transcripts(1), tutoring(1), withdrawals(24), other(2), policy issue(4)

**76 Student Conduct Concerns:** Academic misconduct(21), assault(1), battery(5), classroom disruption(6), deceitfulness(1), due process(1), harassment(4), hazing(1), judicial system(13), residence hall misconduct(7), roommate disputes(4), sanctions(5), sexual harassment(6), policy issue(1)

**101 Classroom Instruction Matters:** Attendance(9), course syllabus(2), discriminatory grading(3), faculty absences(4), final exams(7), grade appeals(34), grade change(7), grading standards(14), make-up work(5), personality conflicts(4), quality of instruction(10), other(2)

**84 Faculty/Staff Performance Concerns:** Deceitfulness(2), derogatory comments(1), discrimination(5), favoritism(9), harassment(17), inaccurate advising(9), inattentiveness(15), incompetence(1), intimidation(9), retaliation(6), rudeness(5), sexual harassment(3), other(2)

**87 Employment Issues:** Academic freedom(1), disciplinary action(4), discrimination(2), grievance(1), harassment(13), hiring process(10), inadequate staffing(1), insubordination(1), job classification(1), job description(2), job duties(1), merit raise(1), payroll(3), performance evaluation(4), personality conflicts(1), poor supervisory skills(1), probation(1), promotion(1), salary/benefits(9), separation(2), student employment(10), supervisor/employee relations(3), suspension(3), termination(4), work schedule(1), other(2), policy issue(4)

**207 Miscellaneous:** Career advising(7), disability accommodations(4), environmental issues(2), ethical considerations(29), health concerns(9), immigration issues(1), interpersonal problems(1), legal issues(9), off-campus housing(8), off-campus problems(12), on-campus housing(23), parking issues(9), privacy issues(5), records retention(2), safety issues(4), other(17), policy development(53), policy issue(12)

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

**Table 4**

**All Issues (Primary and Secondary) Presented in 2005-06\***

**Financial Concerns:** Contracts(20), emergency loans(5), encumbrances(15), eviction(1), fees(9), financial aid(37), fines(10), independent status(3), insurance(4), leases(11), parking tickets(2), paycheck(3), refunds(14), tuition(16), tuition waiver(9), other(8), policy issue(9)

**Academic:** Academic advising(62), academic probation/dismissal(39), add/drop(13), admission(14), certification(6), class permits(12), class scheduling(18), clinical/student teaching course(15), closed classes(8), comprehensive exams(2), credit transfer(13), degree/graduation requirements(61), incompletes(22), medical withdrawal(20), placement testing(4), performance review(4), program admission(11), program dismissal(9), registration(25), reinstatement(13), repeat courses(50), residency status(3), thesis/dissertation(6), transcripts(21), tutoring(13), withdrawals(58), other(10), policy issue(38)

**Student Conduct:** Academic misconduct(41), alcohol(16), assault(17), battery(13), classroom disruption(15), deceitfulness(10), discrimination(1), due process(30), harassment(15), hazing(1), intimidation(9), judicial system(50), residence hall misconduct(26), roommate disputes(9), sanctions(36), sexual harassment(7), theft(3), other(4), policy issue (16)

**Classroom Instruction:** Attendance(35), course syllabus(39), discriminatory grading(24), faculty absences(10), faculty office hours(6), final exams(22), grade appeals(75), grade change(36), grading standards(54), make-up work(26), personality conflicts(32), quality of instruction(39), teacher fluency(2), other(4), policy issue(27)

**Faculty/Staff Performance:** Deceitfulness(71), derogatory comments(105), discrimination(49), favoritism(57), harassment(45), inaccurate advising(53), inattentiveness(156), incompetence(40), intimidation(89), retaliation(77), retention of tests/papers(12), rudeness(81), sexual harassment(7), theft(2), other(3)

**Employment:** Academic freedom(12), disciplinary action(18), discrimination(16), grievance(34), harassment(30), hearing(1), hiring process(25), inadequate staffing(1), insubordination(6), job classification(10), job description(14), job duties(20), merit raise(5), morale(24), payroll(5), performance evaluation(35), personality conflicts(47), poor supervisory skills(48), probation(2), promotion(4), salary/benefits(29), separation(6), sexual harassment(2), student employment(18), supervisor/employee relations(62), suspension(3), tenure(3), termination(12), work schedule(9), working atmosphere(19), working conditions(4), work load(6), other(7), policy issue(39)

**Miscellaneous:** Career advising(16), disability accommodations(14), environmental issues(6), ethical considerations(122), health concerns(80), immigration issues(6), interpersonal problems(26), legal issues(128), off-campus housing(20), off-campus problems(53), on-campus housing(48), parking issues(10), privacy issues(41), records retention(10), safety issues(11), other(27), policy development(68), policy issue(23)

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

**Table 5**

**All Issues (Primary and Secondary) Presented in 2005-06 Sorted by Constituency\***

<b><u>Types of Concerns</u></b>	<b><u>Students</u></b>	<b><u>Faculty</u></b>	<b><u>Supportive Professional Staff</u></b>	<b><u>Operating Staff</u></b>	<b><u>Family</u></b>	<b><u>Policy</u></b>	<b><u>Other</u></b>
<b>Financial Concerns</b>	143	4	0	4	21	2	2
<b>Student Academic Status</b>	492	6	6	3	47	8	8
<b>Student Conduct</b>	263	15	12	5	8	13	3
<b>Classroom Instruction</b>	347	59	5	1	13	6	0
<b>Faculty/Staff Performance</b>	424	139	66	168	35	4	11
<b>Employment Issues</b>	101	117	102	207	11	25	13
<b>Miscellaneous Concerns</b>	336	98	68	75	37	67	28

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