

Northern Illinois University

OFFICE OF THE OMBUDSMAN
ANNUAL REPORT

May 14, 2006—May 12, 2007

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University Ombudsman

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

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 also due in large part to the efforts of our program services specialist, Mary Ann Erickson, and our graduate assistants, Kailin James and April Morgan. Their tireless efforts and dedication are hereby acknowledged and greatly appreciated.

INTRODUCTION

This annual report reviews the services offered over the past year by the NIU Office of the Ombudsman. If you are unfamiliar with the role of the office, let me begin by very briefly explaining its operation. It is a neutral and confidential unit where any member of the campus community can seek assistance when attempting to resolve a university-related issue or conflict. The ombudsman is independent of the university's formal administrative structure and serves as an alternative source of information regarding university policies and procedures for those seeking to resolve conflicts. The NIU ombudsman cannot impose solutions but suggests options and advice that may help the individual to resolve the concern more effectively.

Northern Illinois University established the Office of the Ombudsman 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 19). Since that time over 25,000 faculty members, 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, does not participate in any formal proceeding, 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 informal and formal 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. It is not unusual for members of our community to be unaware or uncertain about the appropriate campus contacts and resources. As a result, we commonly serve such individuals by referring them to persons authorized to address their concerns. 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.

One of the things we do when people contact our office is ask what steps have already been taken to try to resolve the situation. Disputes and grievances can often be resolved with simple, honest communication. We offer people basic guidelines or tips that may help people resolve difficulties on their own, and a list of such tips follows (condensed from the 2005 annual report of the Citizen's Aide/Ombudsman, State of Iowa).

- Be pleasant, persistent and patient
- Exercise your appeal rights
- Pick the right communication mode
- Strategize
- Plan your questions
- Be prepared
- Keep records
- Read what is sent to you

CAMPUS SERVICE

In addition to serving the needs of the 1,080 individuals who contacted us for assistance over the past year, we engaged in numerous activities designed to proactively address potential concerns of members of the campus community. Prior to the beginning of the school year, these included an active presence in summer orientation sessions (“Northern Neighborhood”) for new students and their family members, speaking to CHANCE students in their orientation sessions, as well as participating in the annual residence hall “Move-In Day”. The ombudsman also spoke to new teaching assistants participating in the Teaching Assistant Training and Development Program, residence hall community advisors and hall directors, faculty members attending a Teaching Effectiveness Institute, new international students at their orientation session, new academic department chairpersons, and UNIV-101/201 instructors during their training.

During the course of the academic year, members of the office staff participated in numerous other informational presentations to members of our community in an effort to avert potential concerns and to heighten awareness of the Office of the Ombudsman and its services. Included among these activities were various fairs and expos such as New Student Welcome Days, the Welcome Fair for International Students, the Wellness Fair, the Employee Benefits Fair, the Off-Campus Housing and Information Fair, and the Annual Minority Reception. In response to requests received from course instructors and other members of the university community throughout the year, the ombudsman also gave more than 50 individual presentations to classes, department faculties, and other groups.

A WORD ABOUT COMMUNITY

We frequently refer to the diverse group of people affiliated with our university as a “community”. While there are a large number of institutional traits that may enhance or detract from a sense of community, and while different people may use the term from somewhat different perspectives on its meaning, there are some criteria that are universally necessary in order for people to feel as though they are part of a community regardless of the context. Perhaps the most important of these is a sense of belonging that can only be engendered by a feeling of being respected and included, both as a person and as a contributor to the culture of the community. To have each person who is a part of our university feel recognized, included, and valued is a desirable goal. Such perceptions engender many positive outcomes including increased class attendance, incidents of care and respectfulness for others, greater work productivity and efficiency, and even donations to the university.

There seems to be a growing perception among members of the NIU community, unfortunately, that we are becoming a “more corporate” culture. People expressing this perception seem to believe that a higher value is being placed on things like money and administrative authority while a lower value is being placed on people and their needs. A sense of community can be quickly eroded when such a perception, accurate or not, germinates and spreads throughout our institutional culture. If we wish to avert this scenario and strengthen a sense of community among our members, we must take intentional actions designed to demonstrate that this perception is incorrect.

There are some things that have been done in the past year at the university that have assisted in strengthening our sense of community. The strategic planning process is one such example. In its initial stages, this process has included the active, personal involvement of over one hundred individuals. The planned continuation of this process has great potential for the meaningful participation of an even larger number of the members of our community. For this process to continue to enhance our sense of community, it is essential that it be undertaken in a way that is thoughtfully and intentionally inclusive—including and engaging large and diverse groups of people in a manner that makes them feel heard and respected. An encouraging precedent has been established in this regard. As the process proceeds to other levels of the institution, it is hoped that these trends continue to be evidenced.

TRENDS

The ombudsman met with many pertinent administrators, shared governance leaders, and presidential commissions over the past year to discuss specifically relevant trends noted in the concerns presented to staff in the Office of the Ombudsman. These discussions included the quantity and nature of the issues presented by those contacting the office for assistance, and they frequently included recommendations and assistance in developing strategies to decrease the number and personal impact of such concerns in the future. Examples of such strategies included the development of new policies and procedures, personnel changes including staffing patterns and position descriptions, marketing approaches and content, and the allocation of resources.

While many of these discussions occurred throughout the year as trends were noted, others took place over the summer subsequent to the analysis of the annual data provided in this report. The ombudsman initiated nearly sixty such dialogues during the past year.

DATA TABLES

When interpreting the data displayed on the following pages, it is crucial to keep the following points in mind in order to place the data in the proper context.

1. These data represent the largely unsubstantiated and uninvestigated allegations of individuals contacting the Office of the Ombudsman for assistance. They are, at best, honest singular perceptions, not the objective judgments of uninvolved parties.
2. These data are not the result of a poll or random survey of members of the university community. Rather, the incidents reflected in the data represent concerns presented by 1,080 self-selected individuals who chose to contact our office.

Questions or comments regarding this report are welcome and may be directed to the Ombudsman, Dr. Tim Griffin, at 815.753.1414.

Table 2

Types of Primary Issues Presented by Campus Constituencies in 2006-07*

<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	48	1	2	0	10	1	0	62
Student Academic Status	126	2	2	0	15	0	7	152
Student Conduct	64	8	2	0	8	1	2	85
Classroom Instruction	84	19	1	3	4	0	1	112
Faculty/Staff Performance	62	25	6	11	5	0	1	110
Employment Issues	28	28	15	17	1	3	0	92
Miscellaneous Concerns	<u>71</u>	<u>29</u>	<u>13</u>	<u>12</u>	<u>14</u>	<u>54</u>	<u>9</u>	<u>202</u>
Total	483	112	41	43	57	59	20	815

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

Table 3

815 Primary Issues Presented in 2006-07*

62 Financial Concerns: Contracts(7), encumbrances(14), fees(1), financial aid(14), fines(2), insurance(6), leases(2), parking tickets(2), paycheck(1), refunds(4), tuition waiver(2), other(4), policy issue(2)

152 Academic Status Issues: Academic advising(6), academic probation/dismissal(19), add/drop(4), admission(11), class permits(1), class scheduling(5), clinical/student teaching course(9), credit transfer(2), degree/graduation requirements(11), hardship withdrawals(5), incompletes(3), medical withdrawal(11), program admission(4), program dismissal(1), registration(6), reinstatement(6), repeat courses(7), performance review(2), SAP(1), thesis/dissertation(5), transcripts(5), withdrawals(19), other(2), policy issue(5)

85 Student Conduct Concerns: Academic misconduct(15), classroom disruption(5), deceitfulness(2), discrimination(1), due process(2), harassment(9), intimidation(4), judicial system(14), residence hall misconduct(6), roommate disputes(17), sanctions(4), stalking(2), theft(4)

112 Classroom Instruction Matters: Attendance(11), course syllabus(4), discriminatory grading(9), faculty absences(2), final exams(14), grade appeals(41), grade change(9), grading standards(6), make-up work(6), personality conflicts(3), quality of instruction(1), tutoring(1), other(2), policy issue(3)

110 Faculty/Staff Performance Concerns: Deceitfulness(9), derogatory comments(9), discrimination(6), favoritism(5), harassment(12), inaccurate advising(11), inattentiveness(18), incompetence(5), intimidation(15), retaliation(6), retention of tests/papers(3), rudeness(6), other(5)

92 Employment Issues: Academic freedom(1), disciplinary action(3), discrimination(3), grievance(1), harassment(13), hiring process(4), job classification(3), job description(1), job duties(5), payroll(1), performance evaluation(7), personality conflicts(2), poor supervisory skills(2), probation(1), salary/benefits(3), separation(6), student employment(9), supervisor/employee relations(4), suspension(1), termination(10), work schedule(5), working conditions(1), other(3), policy issue(2)

202 Miscellaneous: Career advising(5), disability accommodations(3), environmental issues(5), ethical considerations(13), FERPA(2), health concerns(8), interpersonal problems(1), legal issues(13), off-campus housing(9), off-campus problems(18), on-campus housing(17), parking issues(2), privacy issues(6), records retention(1), safety issues(6), other(17), policy development(65), policy issue(11)

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

Table 4

All Issues (Primary and Secondary) Presented in 2006-07*

Financial Concerns: Contracts(27), emergency funding(3), encumbrances(30), fees(13), financial aid(43), fines(7), independent status(5), insurance(13), leases(17), parking tickets(6), paycheck(2), refunds(26), scholarship(7), tuition(8), tuition waiver(4), other(11), policy issue(9)

Academic: Academic advising(68), academic probation/dismissal(36), add/drop(12), admission(19), certification(3), class permits(7), class scheduling(16), clinical/student teaching course(14), closed classes(3), comprehensive exams(6), credit transfer(19), degree/graduation requirements(57), hardship withdrawal(11), incompletes(19), medical withdrawal(24), performance review(2), program admission(12), program dismissal(7), registration(27), reinstatement(15), repeat courses(40), residency status(3), thesis/dissertation(12), transcripts(17), withdrawals(49), other(11), policy issue(44)

Student Conduct: Academic misconduct(25), alcohol(17), assault(15), battery(8), classroom disruption(8), deceitfulness(13), discrimination(13), due process(24), harassment(21), intimidation(17), judicial system(52), residence hall misconduct(21), roommate disputes(22), sanctions(31), theft(12), other(19), policy issue (10)

Classroom Instruction: Attendance(45), course syllabus(40), discriminatory grading(23), faculty absences(9), faculty office hours(5), final exams(30), grade appeals(80), grade change(31), grading standards(31), make-up work(25), personality conflicts(42), quality of instruction(22), teacher fluency(1), tutoring(11), other(10), policy issue(32)

Faculty/Staff Performance: Deceitfulness(77), derogatory comments(102), discrimination(42), favoritism(75), harassment(45), inaccurate advising(65), inattentiveness(119), incompetence(27), intimidation(97), retaliation(92), retention of tests/papers(22), rudeness(82), other(20)

Employment: Academic freedom(14), disciplinary action(14), discrimination(17), grievance(17), harassment(25), hearing(2), hiring process(34), inadequate staffing(9), insubordination(1), job classification(7), job description(21), job duties(21), merit raise(6), morale(27), payroll(2), performance evaluation(31), personality conflicts(57), poor supervisory skills(61), probation(2), promotion(3), retirement(1), salary/benefits(17), separation(16), student employment(20), supervisor/employee relations(48), suspension(1), tenure(2), termination(26), work schedule(26), working atmosphere(4), working conditions(6), work load(9), other(6), policy issue(40)

Miscellaneous: Athletics(2), career advising(14), disability accommodations(19), environmental issues(9), ethical considerations(106), FERPA(13), health concerns(58), immigration issues(3), interpersonal problems(27), legal issues(149), off-campus housing(30), off-campus problems(77), on-campus housing(56), parking issues(5), privacy issues(43), records retention(8), safety issues(22), other(25), policy development(92), policy issue(26)

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

Table 5

All Issues (Primary and Secondary) Presented in 2006-07 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	198	3	2	0	26	2	0
Student Academic Status	454	19	10	5	46	7	13
Student Conduct	238	34	8	0	30	10	8
Classroom Instruction	332	70	7	6	14	6	2
Faculty/Staff Performance	389	229	70	112	53	11	1
Employment Issues	123	205	103	142	6	14	0
Miscellaneous Concerns	340	126	74	54	67	96	27

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