

Northern Illinois University

OFFICE OF THE OMBUDSMAN

ANNUAL REPORT

May 13, 2007—May 17, 2008

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University Ombudsman**

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The ombudsman was blessed with the able assistance of three staff members during the 2007-08 academic year. Mary Ann Erickson not only handled all office management and clerical duties, she also made hundreds of referrals, handled scores of cases, and performed notary public services for many. Perhaps her most critical function was the performance of consultee triage: listening to the concerns of those contacting the office for assistance, and then either advising them herself or assigning them to the ombudsman or one of the graduate assistants as appropriate. The experience, empathy, and skill she demonstrates in this role is an invaluable asset to our office.

Graduate assistants April Morgan and Cynthia Edwards provided direct assistance to undergraduate students, performed many of the office marketing tasks, and aided immeasurably in the logistical operation of the office. Their assistance was crucial in the successful completion of our mission this year.

YEAR IN REVIEW

The NIU community has experienced one of the most challenging years in its history, and it has been no less so for the Office of the Ombudsman. To reflect on the past year is to recall three distinct troubling events on our campus that defined a year that has been without a doubt the most challenging and stressful year in the history of our institution.

The first defining event of this year was a natural occurrence--torrential rains that began on the afternoon of "Move-in Day" and continued throughout the night causing severe flooding on campus and in the surrounding community. This ultimately caused the cancellation of the Fall Convocation and many other "Welcome Days" events on campus as well as the temporary relocation of hundreds of students. With the Kishwaukee River bridges under water at Lincoln Highway and Fairview, Taylor, and Bethany Roads, many staff members found their normal ten-minute commute to and from work increased to over an hour on that Friday as all traffic was re-routed to Hillcrest Drive to access the one lone bridge that remained open. Hundreds of students residing off campus and scores of faculty and staff suffered from water damage and the loss of material possessions due to flooding at their places of residence. Many students, faculty, staff, and other DeKalb area residents worked around the clock to

assist in community sandbagging and rescue efforts. Occurring during a time of year that is always very hectic in the Office of the Ombudsman, this event and its institutional impact added greatly to the number of frustrated and angry people who contacted our office for information and assistance. Unfortunately, the monumental impact of this event on the community, our campus, and the Office of the Ombudsman, was merely a harbinger of things to come.

At the beginning of final exam week in the fall semester, a credible threat to the safety of our community was identified by university police and resulted in the closing of our campus. An unanticipated closure of campus always impacts the lives of our faculty, staff, and students, and when it occurs during the week of final exams, the disruptive affect is significantly heightened. Given the reason for this particular closure, there was the additional affect of making many fearful for their very lives—a fear that seemed justified by the seemingly ubiquitous visual presence of the FBI, State police, and other law enforcement officials in addition to our own campus police. When the university resumed normal operations later in the week, many students, often at the insistence of their parents, did not return. Most faculty members were sympathetic about the situation and accommodated the needs of the students impacted by the situation by devoting themselves to the onerous task of making alternative arrangements for culminating academic assessments of these students. Despite the university's response and commendable efforts to alleviate the impact of this disruptive incident, the impact of this event echoed in the Office of the Ombudsman for months as a heightened number of cases involving make-up work and grading disputes continued well into the spring semester.

Several weeks into the spring semester, just as it seemed the campus was returning to some sense of normalcy, the tragic shootings of February 14 occurred in Cole Hall. Five of our undergraduates were killed and many others were injured and/or fled for their lives. This horrific tragedy sparked widespread terror and grief throughout our community resulting in a short-term lockdown and subsequent closure of campus for more than a week. The impact of this incident on our community as a whole is unprecedented, both in terms of the short-term response and six-day cancellation of classes as well as in the longer term recovery process. Despite the remarkable

and tremendous response of our law enforcement officials and the generous outpouring of support from the surrounding communities and across the nation, all of us experienced and/or responded to great sorrow and grief and to the realization that this tragedy wounded us all in one way or another.

While not formally involved in the official emergency response, the Office of the Ombudsman received nearly two hundred contacts in the days immediately following the shootings. Many of the issues brought to our attention during this time were related to the university closure, faculty and staff training, counseling services provided to returning students by hundreds of volunteers, the change in the semester calendar, and concerns for personal safety. While some of these concerns are included in the data at the end of this report, many more were not recorded due to the crisis mode of response necessary in the first few days following the incident.

It has been a defining year for our community. Thankfully, the vast majority of our faculty, staff, and students responded admirably to each challenge this past year, showing compassion and sympathy for those most negatively affected by these events, pitching in to assist in whatever ways possible, and clearly demonstrating a concerted effort to move forward together to forge a new spirit of community on our campus.

OUTREACH, SERVICE, AND SUPPORT ACTIVITIES

In addition to providing direct consultations to the individuals who contacted the Office of the Ombudsman for assistance, staff in the office provided presentations, training, and support to numerous campus entities. Many of these are delineated in Appendix A of this report. The Office hosted the annual Midwest Meeting of College and University ombudspersons in July. In addition, the ombudsman taught a section of UNIV-101 for new freshman, delivered presentations at two professional conferences, and served as advisor to the NIU Ice Hockey team. Over 4,100 people visited the office web page.

TRENDS

Academic Misconduct

A long term trend noticed in the Office of the Ombudsman has been an increase in the number of students and faculty contacting us to discuss accusations of academic misconduct, especially plagiarism. The number of such cases increased nearly fifty percent this year over the prior year. Some of this increase is perhaps due to a heightened awareness and vigilance on the part of the faculty, but other cases may be attributable to an increased use of the internet by students, a resource that provides ease of cutting and pasting.

Proper attribution of sources is a fundamental and crucial requirement to the academic process. Students who violate this principle often face appropriately stern consequences. Students who have taken English 103 and 104 at NIU receive invaluable training in both the principles and practices of proper attribution. However, most of those enrolled in upper-division undergraduate and graduate courses did not take these English classes at NIU. We believe that it is not a coincidence that a disproportionate number of the students contacting the Office of the Ombudsman who have been accused of plagiarism are transfer and international students. Therefore, faculty members are strongly urged to make their expectations in this regard clear to students in every class.

Financial Concerns

The number of students and family members contacting the Office of the Ombudsman for assistance in meeting financial obligations increased nearly twenty percent this year. This increase is only the latest in several years of heightened concern related to this issue. Many of our students come from families that are not among the most financially secure. While the institution is not responsible for the trend of decreasing funding from federal and state sources, we must do a better job of providing empathic and convenient assistance to students and family members facing financial difficulties to reduce undesirable consequences in terms of enrollment and retention.

Supervisory Training and Accountability

Staff supervisors are expected to possess and demonstrate appropriate supervisory skills, and administrators above these supervisors must hold them accountable for performing these skills. As evidenced by concerns presented to the Office of the Ombudsman and in a campus-wide survey of supportive professional staff this year, many of those in supervisory positions on campus are perceived as avoiding or inappropriately addressing problems that arise within their areas of responsibility. Perhaps some of this behavior may be attributed to a lack of available and effective training for those in supervisory positions and, if so, such training can be provided. In order to effectively assess the performance of those in supervisory positions, however, performance evaluations must include input from their supervisees since the daily behaviors of supervisory staff are most consistently observed only by those who report to them. It is recommended that the input from staff evaluations of supervisors be included to some degree in the decision-making process for granting annual salary increment and/or promotion to supervisors.

Policy Cases

One of the most crucial functions of our office is in the area of policy and procedural development. As the only campus entity uniquely positioned to hear about all types of concerns from all members of our community, we can note trends regarding those expressed concerns and provide information about them to appropriate institutional offices and individuals. This feedback allows the institution to meet the needs of its constituents and accomplish its mission much more effectively than would otherwise be the case.

With long-term declining resources, the ability to serve in this capacity has been seriously impaired. As a result, the incidences of providing such feedback declined nearly a third in the past year. Further budget reductions anticipated for the upcoming year will result in an additional decrease in the number of staff hours available to meet demand and will further reduce our ability to perform this important role. Recognizing this concern, the University Council has reorganized the budgeting structure and budget development process. It is hoped that this strategy will help alleviate this problem.

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 1,129 self-selected individuals who chose to contact our office.
3. Due to the hectic nature of our work in the two weeks following the tragic incident of February 14, dozens of cases and scores of referrals were not documented. Therefore scores of the numbers presented in the tables that follow are lower than the actual numbers of individuals contacting the Office of the Ombudsman for assistance.

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 2007-08*

<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	83	2	1	1	11	1	1	100
Student Academic Status	133	8	2	0	10	2	6	161
Student Conduct	56	4	6	1	9	0	0	76
Classroom Instruction	96	10	1	2	1	2	0	112
Faculty/Staff Performance	54	11	10	8	6	2	4	95
Employment Issues	11	22	16	12	2	0	1	64
Miscellaneous Concerns	<u>77</u>	<u>12</u>	<u>16</u>	<u>9</u>	<u>13</u>	<u>50</u>	<u>17</u>	<u>194</u>
Total	510	69	52	33	52	57	29	802

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

Table 3

802 Primary Issues Presented in 2007-08*

100 Financial Concerns: Contracts(12), emergency funding(1), encumbrances(24), evictions(1), fees(7), financial aid(22), independent status(1), insurance(3), leases(2), parking tickets(3), paycheck(3), refunds(12), scholarships(1), tuition(1), tuition waiver(2), other(3), policy issue(2)

161 Academic Status Issues: Academic advising(5), academic probation/dismissal(29), add/drop(5), admission(5), certification(1), class permits(1), class scheduling(5), clinical/student teaching course(4), closed classes(5), comprehensive exams(2), credit transfer(1), degree/graduation requirements(18), hardship withdrawals(3), incompletes(3), medical withdrawal(5), placement testing(4), program admission(2), program dismissal(9), registration(7), reinstatement(4), repeat courses(4), residency status (1), SAP(1), staffing/performance review(7), thesis/dissertation(3), transcripts(3), withdrawals(19), other(2), policy issue(3)

76 Student Conduct Concerns: Academic misconduct(28), alcohol(2), assault(1), battery(3), classroom disruption(6), deceitfulness(3), due process(1), harassment(3), intimidation(1), judicial system(13), residence hall misconduct(4), roommate disputes(4), sanctions(3), stalking(1), theft(3)

112 Classroom Instruction Matters: Attendance(1), course syllabus(2), discriminatory grading(1), faculty absences(2), final exams(14), grade appeals(46), grade change(3), grading standards(9), make-up work(5), personality conflicts(2), quality of instruction(10), teacher fluency(1), other(5), policy issue(11)

95 Faculty/Staff Performance Concerns: Deceitfulness(2), derogatory comments(3), discrimination(5), favoritism(3), harassment(14), inaccurate advising(13), inattentiveness(17), incompetence(14), intimidation(14), retaliation(1), retention of tests/papers(2), rudeness(2), sexual harassment(3), other(2)

64 Employment Issues: Disciplinary action(2), discrimination(1), harassment(1), hiring process(5), job classification(1), job duties(1), merit raise(1), morale(1), performance evaluation(1), personality conflicts(2), poor supervisory skills(6), promotion(1), salary/benefits(4), separation(5), sexual harassment(1), student employment(4), supervisor/employee relations(3), tenure(1), termination(9), work schedule(6), working conditions(2), other(2), policy issue(4)

194 Miscellaneous: Career advising(1), disability accommodations(3), environmental issues(7), ethical considerations(6), health concerns(17), immigration issues(1), interpersonal problems(5), legal issues(11), off-campus housing(4), off-campus problems(16), on-campus housing(15), parking issues(1), privacy issues(11), records retention(3), safety issues(8), other(23), policy development(51), policy issues(11)

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

Table 4

All Issues (Primary and Secondary) Presented in 2007-08*

Financial Concerns: Contracts(35), emergency funding(7), encumbrances(43), evictions(3), fees(21), financial aid(64), fines(9), independent status(3), insurance(17), leases(10), parking tickets(4), paycheck(6), refunds(41), scholarship(15), tuition(13), tuition waiver(7), other(19), policy issue(24)

Academic: Academic advising(76), academic probation/dismissal(42), add/drop(23), admission(12), certification(7), class permits(7), class scheduling(13), clinical/student teaching course(12), closed classes(17), comprehensive exams(5), credit transfer(21), degree/graduation requirements(53), hardship withdrawal(15), incompletes(13), medical withdrawal(22), placement testing(6), program admission(16), program dismissal(19), registration(42), reinstatement(20), repeat courses(44), residency status(3), SAP(2), staffing/performance review(20), thesis/dissertation(5), transcripts(28), withdrawals(50), other(8), policy issue(31)

Student Conduct: Academic misconduct(38), alcohol(12), assault(28), battery(9), classroom disruption(10), deceitfulness(16), discrimination(5), due process(33), harassment(16), intimidation(8), judicial system(70), residence hall misconduct(22), roommate disputes(13), sanctions(36), sexual harassment(2), stalking(6), theft(7), other(10), policy issue(16)

Classroom Instruction: Attendance(36), course syllabus(49), discriminatory grading(24), faculty absences(13), faculty office hours(13), final exams(30), grade appeals(97), grade change(25), grading standards(36), make-up work(24), personality conflicts(30), quality of instruction(44), teacher fluency(4), tutoring(9), other(11), policy issue(32)

Faculty/Staff Performance: Deceitfulness(55), derogatory comments(117), discrimination(49), favoritism(51), harassment(30), inaccurate advising(47), inattentiveness(142), incompetence(71), intimidation(74), retaliation(66), retention of tests/papers(12), rudeness(71), sexual harassment(6), theft(1), other(10)

Employment: Academic freedom(4), disciplinary action(9), discrimination(11), grievance(15), harassment(17), hearing(1), hiring process(23), inadequate staffing(4), insubordination(3), job classification(15), job description(18), job duties(25), merit raise(2), morale(30), payroll(1), performance evaluation(24), personality conflicts(36), poor supervisory skills(41), promotion(8), retirement(1), salary/benefits(7), separation(10), sexual harassment(1), student employment(19), supervisor/employee relations(38), tenure(5), termination(12), work schedule(20), working atmosphere(2), working conditions(4), work load(12), other(8), policy issue(39)

Miscellaneous: Career advising(6), disability accommodations(11), environmental issues(13), ethical considerations(46), FERPA(10), health concerns(68), immigration issues(9), interpersonal problems(21), legal issues(110), off-campus housing(21), off-campus problems(71), on-campus housing(70), parking issues(7), privacy issues(42), records retention(11), safety issues(39), other(37), policy development(62), policy issue(30)

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

Table 5

All Issues (Primary and Secondary) Presented in 2007-08 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	274	5	2	5	35	16	4
Student Academic Status	530	24	2	2	51	12	11
Student Conduct	255	24	29	6	36	3	4
Classroom Instruction	404	42	5	4	15	7	0
Faculty/Staff Performance	430	110	95	84	50	21	12
Employment Issues	66	129	117	125	12	13	3
Miscellaneous Concerns	363	58	54	41	47	91	31

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

Appendix A

Ombuds Staff Outreach, Service, and Support Activities of 2007-08

Presentations by Ombudsman or Staff

Faculty Development Workshop
Graduate School Orientation
Health and Human Sciences Advisory Staff
International Student Orientation Panel
Journalism Camp
Presidential Commission on the Status of Women
Presentations to Two Residence Hall Floor Groups
Student-Athlete Academic Support Services
Student Success Task Force
Supportive Professional Staff Council Workshop
Supportive Professional Staff Employee Orientation
Teaching Assistant Orientation Panel
Teaching Effectiveness Institute
University 101 and Other Classes

Training Sessions Provided by Ombudsman

Housing Community Advisors Training
Northern Star Staff Training
Orientation Leader Training
Teaching Assistant Training
UNIV-101
UNIV-101 Instructor Training
UNIV-101 Instructor Mentor Program

CHANCE Orientation
Employee Wellness Fair
Housing CA Resource Fair
Move-In Day
New Faculty Forum
New International Students Welcome Fair
New Minority Student Reception
Northern Neighborhood (general new student orientation)
Orientation Resource Fair
Office Flyers Posted on Campus Bulletin Boards and in Buses
Table Tents in Residence Hall Cafeterias and Holmes Student Center
Window Display in Holmes Student Center

Ombudsman Service/Committees

Affirmative Action/Diversity Resources Committee
Committee on the Undergraduate Academic Environment
Faculty Senate
First-Year Connections Advisory Board
Operating Staff Council
Presidential Commission on Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity
Presidential Commission on the Status of Minorities
Supportive Professional Staff Council
Supportive Professional Staff Council Ad Hoc Committee
Supportive Professional Staff Workplace Issues Committee
University Council

Office Outreach Activities