

Northern Illinois University

OFFICE OF THE OMBUDSMAN

ANNUAL REPORT

May 18, 2008—May 16, 2009

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University Ombudsman**

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The Office of the Ombudsman is the only NIU campus resource that is confidential, neutral, and serves all constituencies and members of the campus community who have any type of university-related concern. Some people contact the Office of the Ombudsman after attempting unsuccessfully to resolve their concern. Others contact us while deciding whether and how to take action to address their situation. The Office of the Ombudsman provides helpful assistance to people in both situations.

The staff in the Office empathically listens to whatever concern is being expressed. They often provide a “reality check” by discussing the situation in light of what is common practice at the university. Applicable policies and procedures are identified to assist in this process and to help develop available options to address the situation or resolve the concern. Available options usually include both informal and formal actions designed specifically to address the unique situation and individual(s) involved. If options involve making contact with others, the Office of the Ombudsman staff provides names, titles, and contact information for those individuals and/or offices. The staff often suggests the best contact method and message to achieve the desired outcome.

Community members who consult with staff in the Office can do so with assurance that their contact will remain entirely confidential. No one will know they contacted the office unless there is a necessity for the office to act in order to prevent imminent personal harm. Independent of the NIU administrative structure, consultees can also be assured that staff in the office can assist them from an entirely neutral perspective.

With an eye toward improving the organization, the Ombudsman informs university administrators and governance bodies of broad trends in the types of issues and concerns raised within the community and recommends changes in institutional policies and procedures in an effort to reduce the number of people experiencing such barriers to their success in the future.

Dedicated, knowledgeable, and well-trained staff members are invaluable in any office or department and no less so in this office. During the past academic year the Ombudsman was blessed to have three competent and diligent individuals helping him to serve our community. Providing much more than administrative support, these staff members serve the ombudsman as sounding boards, marketing consultants, problem solvers, reminders of the institutional history and culture, and as a reality check into the culture of today’s students. Special acknowledgment goes to our graduate assistants, Cynthia Edwards and Demetra Christopoulos, for providing direct consultation with those contacting the office for assistance and for their contributions to our outreach and marketing efforts. Also making an invaluable contribution was Program Services Specialist Mary Ann Erickson who once again managed our resources, supervised the graduate assistants, and made sure that all office activities were coordinated and completed in a timely and professional manner. The unique and critical contributions of these three individuals are very much appreciated.

The NIU Office of the Ombudsman has now completed its fortieth year of operation. Commensurate with this milestone, this annual report includes a brief section about the history of the office as well as a discussion of long-term trends recognized among the concerns and issues presented.

40 YEARS OF CAMPUS SERVICE: A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

It was 1969. The NIU student population had more than quintupled in size during the prior twenty-five years. With this rapid growth came corresponding increases in the number of faculty and administrators, campus buildings, and the beginnings of the diversity which makes our campus so rich today. It was also a time of unrest and student protest on our campus and across the nation, related to the civil rights movement and the anti-war movement. Group demonstrations were common methods for voicing concerns by those who felt that the increasingly large bureaucracy was not hearing or being adequately responsive to their needs.

Like many other universities around the country, it was during this time that NIU President Rhoten A. Smith established the Office of the Ombudsman and appointed Mr. Michael McDermott as the first ombudsman. The office opened its doors in September, 1969, in a small house at 228 Carroll Avenue and later relocated to 313 Normal Avenue near what is now called the Martin Luther King Commons. The office mission was to improve lines of communication, promote administrative responsiveness to an ever-growing and diverse campus population, and assist people to more effectively navigate a complex bureaucratic system. The office provided a unique confidential and neutral venue for receiving and responding to campus concerns.

Since that time, tens of thousands of students, parents, faculty, and staff members have availed themselves of the services of this office. Besides fulfilling the charge of its original mission, the role of the office has evolved over the years to also serve in a more preventative mode by identifying potentially problematic or inequitable institutional policies and procedures so that they can undergo administrative review prior to the development of actual complaints. Today, the office is located on the 6th floor of the Holmes Student Center. The current ombudsman is Dr. Tim Griffin, who has served in this capacity since 1991. More information about the office is available at: <http://www.niu.edu/ombuds>.

RECOVERY

Extensive efforts were undertaken during the summer of 2008 to prepare our community to continue the healing process following the February shootings in Cole Hall. Faculty and staff were offered extensive support in preparing for returning students and the matriculation of new students for the fall semester. These initiatives were undertaken by a wide array of campus units in the Division of Academic and Student Affairs, as well as by others throughout the university. Thoughtfully conceived and ably delivered, the recovery initiatives were immensely effective in reducing the negative impacts of 2/14. In addition, members of the executive cabinet and their staffs carefully planned and conducted the movement forward for the physical memorial outside Cole Hall and conducted a one-year anniversary memorial service—an event that was greatly needed at that time to help our community continue to heal. As a result of these efforts and others that continued throughout the year, very few people contacted the Office of the Ombudsman with concerns related to the tragedy. The strength and resiliency of our community has evidenced itself in many ways to help put the past behind and move forward.

As this is being written, construction of the permanent memorial to the victims of the tragedy is nearing completion, and the State legislature has appropriated the funds necessary for the renovation of Cole Hall. New landscaping in the Martin Luther King Commons will provide a new look to the center of campus when students and faculty return in the fall. Our healing continues and we look to the future with anticipation and optimism.

TRENDS

The concerns presented by those contacting the office for assistance are annually documented, organized, and analyzed through hundreds of hours of staff time in the Office of the Ombudsman. This effort allows for the identification of trends in the issues raised, both in the short-term and from year to year.

The most clearly apparent long-term trend identified this year is that of financial concerns. As one might expect, this issue was presented mostly by students and/or their parents, but also raised by increasing numbers of NIU staff. As the students' share of the costs of education continues to rise faster than the availability of financial support, this trend is unsurprising and of great concern. As funding for offices that serve student needs are simultaneously reduced, as in the Office of the Ombudsman, staff members find it more and more difficult to effectively accomplish their departmental mission. This combination of these two factors negatively impacts recruitment, retention, morale, and productivity throughout the institution.

The Office noted several other trends related to the current fiscal situation. As the number of staff decreases, the response time for requests for campus services increases. This results in more students and parents contacting the Office of the Ombudsman with concerns about inattentiveness to concerns. We also note that additional expectations have been placed on some faculty and staff to assume the roles and/or duties of departed colleagues who were not replaced. This can mean that they are not only doing additional work, but they may be directing or advising in new areas of knowledge and responsibility for the first time. This may explain the increased number of concerns brought to our office related to the impact of inaccurate information allegedly received from staff or faculty.

We note that when some students work more hours each week to help pay for their education in response to these tough economic times, they have less time to devote to their usual academic load or they enroll in fewer classes. This can lead to additional concerns expressed in our office about academic probation and/or dismissal or a lack of satisfactory academic progress toward degree completion that threatens to impact a student's eligibility for federal financial aid. We also note that as class sizes increase in response to budgetary constraints, more students contact us about various concerns related to classroom instruction.

Other trends this past year seem to have no direct relation to fiscal matters. These include a large increase in the number of people with parking issues and the continuation of a long-term increase in the number of faculty, staff, and students with concerns related to physical and/or psychological health. In contrast, we note a decrease this year in the number of people expressing concerns about student conduct issues.

The final comments of this report are related to the entirely new system of student academic and financial records, called “MyNIU,” that was implemented during the past academic year. There was considerable trepidation regarding this new system on the part of many faculty members who would be submitting grades electronically for the first time and for staff and administrators who would be utilizing it to access student academic and financial information. Indeed, the Office of the Ombudsman was contacted by faculty, staff, students, and parents with concerns related to MyNIU, especially during the fall semester. Given the breadth and scope of impact of this new system, however, we feel that the number of these concerns brought to our attention was really quite small. Herculean efforts on the part of staff in such departments as Information Technology Services, Registration and Records, academic advising offices and others helped to minimize the problems of switching systems.

INCIVILITY

This topic has been addressed repeatedly in NIU Office of the Ombudsman annual reports. Unfortunately, the alleged behaviors of some of the members of our academic community continue to require the inclusion of this topic yet again. This issue is not unique to our campus and, in fact, is receiving more and more attention nationally as indicated by the following works.

The first is the publication of “Faculty Incivility: The Rise of the Academic Bully Culture and What to Do About It.” Written by D. Twale and B. DeLuca and published by Jossey-Bass (2008). This book has very quickly become a standard reference for those wishing to address uncivil behavior on the part of faculty and others in higher education settings. Based on broad and solid research, it documents an increase in uncivil behavior at colleges and universities that rises to the level of bullying and provides practical strategies for individuals and institutions to effectively address such behavior. Many of the techniques offered are as applicable for responding to incivility on the part of staff and students as to faculty.

The second pertinent contribution to this area of study results from a survey of 10,000 graduate students at the University of Minnesota conducted by J. Morse, Director of the Student Conflict Resolution Center at the University of Minnesota, and presented at the 2008 Annual Conference of the International Ombudsman Association. This study found that behavior that is so “offensive, intimidating, or hostile” that it interfered with the students’ “ability to work or learn” was inflicted upon 18% of the respondents and witnessed by an additional 15%. Graduate student performance and retention were significantly impacted in both groups.

If we as an institution wish to attract and retain competent faculty, staff, and students, we must make a greater institutional effort to identify and confront those members of our institutional community who misuse their power by behaving in an abusive manner toward others.

CONCLUSION

When the Office of the Ombudsman opened its doors forty years ago, the campus was a very different place than it is today. In the ensuing decades we have endured hardship and tragedy as well as great triumphs and strides forward. Some things, however, have not changed. Interpersonal conflict remains inevitable; people still struggle to adapt to change; the unique and complex organization of a university campus can present a challenge to those attempting to accomplish their academic and professional goals. As we move forward into the 21st century, the Office of the Ombudsman continues to provide a neutral and confidential environment and remains a vital campus resource for assisting the hundreds of people who contact us each year with these types of campus concerns.

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 1,169 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.

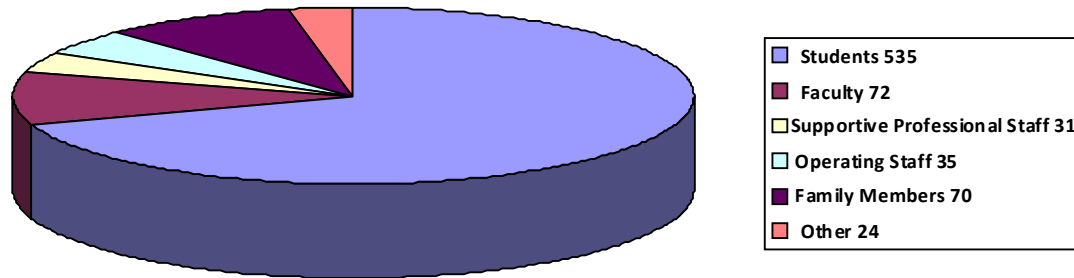
Table 1
Status, Gender and Ethnicity of Office Contacts in 2008-09

<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	213	219	1	433	80	8	147	14	1	183	433
Graduate	32	36	1	69	11	13	19	1	3	22	69
TA/GA	2	6	0	8	0	2	6	0	0	0	8
Student-at-Large	0	2	0	2	2	0	0	0	0	0	2
Former Student/Alum	17	6	0	23	2	1	6	1	1	12	23
Faculty (tenured)	41	19	0	60	0	3	50	1	2	4	60
Faculty (untenured)	3	5	0	8	0	3	0	0	3	2	8
Faculty (temporary)	2	2	0	4	0	0	3	0	0	1	4
Supportive Professionals	12	19	0	31	2	1	22	0	0	6	31
Operating Staff	14	21	0	35	1	0	30	1	0	3	35
Family Members	25	45	0	70	4	1	17	1	1	46	70
Other/Unknown	<u>14</u>	<u>10</u>	<u>0</u>	<u>24</u>	<u>1</u>	<u>0</u>	<u>12</u>	<u>0</u>	<u>0</u>	<u>11</u>	<u>24</u>
	375	390	*2	767	103	32	312	19	11	*290	767

Policy Development Cases **55**
 Total **822**

Simple Referrals to Other Offices **347**
 Total Contacts and Referrals ****1169**

Visits to Ombudsman Website **1690**



* 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

Primary Issues Presented by Campus Constituencies in 2008-09*

<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	76	1	0	2	24	1	2	106
Student Academic Status	146	0	6	1	17	1	4	175
Student Conduct	46	5	5	0	5	0	0	61
Classroom Instruction	109	10	0	0	7	3	0	129
Faculty/Staff Performance	61	9	4	9	5	1	1	90
Employment Issues	15	23	6	17	0	2	0	63
Miscellaneous Concerns	<u>82</u>	<u>24</u>	<u>10</u>	<u>6</u>	<u>12</u>	<u>47</u>	<u>17</u>	<u>198</u>
Total	535	72	31	35	70	55	24	822

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

Table 3

822 Primary Issues Presented in 2008-09*

106 Financial Concerns: Contracts(5), emergency funding(4), encumbrances(19), evictions(1), fees(3), financial aid(42), independent status(1), insurance(7), leases(2), parking tickets(2), paycheck(2), refunds(8), tuition(4), other(3), policy issue(3)

175 Academic Status Issues: Academic advising(10), academic probation/dismissal(30), add/drop(5), admission(8), certification(1), class scheduling(2), clinical/student teaching course(7), closed classes(2), credit transfer(3), degree/graduation requirements(18), hardship withdrawals(1), incompletes(1), medical withdrawal(9), placement testing(1), program admission(9), program dismissal(2), registration(8), reinstatement(5), repeat courses(9), residency status(2), SAP(4), staffing/performance review(3), thesis/dissertation(1), transcripts(3), withdrawals(16), other(7), policy issue(8)

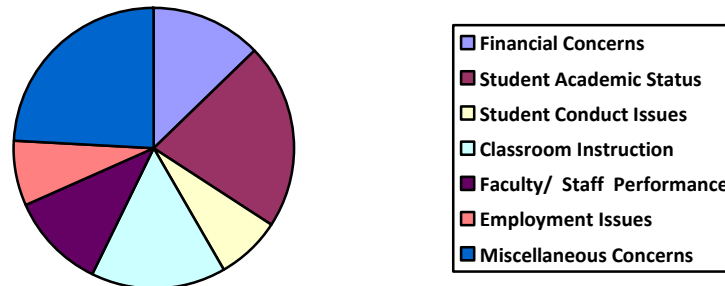
61 Student Conduct Concerns: Academic misconduct(13), alcohol(2), assault(1), classroom disruption(1), deceitfulness(2), discrimination(1), due process(3), harassment(9), intimidation(3), judicial system(6), residence hall misconduct(9), roommate disputes(4), sanctions(4), theft(3)

129 Classroom Instruction Matters: Attendance(7), course syllabus(2), discriminatory grading(4), final exams(12), grade appeals(57), grade change(8), grading standards(10), make-up work(4), quality of instruction(15), teacher fluency(1), tutoring(1), other(3), policy issue(5)

90 Faculty/Staff Performance Concerns: Deceitfulness(1), derogatory comments(3), discrimination(8), favoritism(2), harassment(7), inaccurate advising(8), inattentiveness(24), incompetence(9), intimidation(6), retaliation(5), retention of tests/papers(6), rudeness(9), sexual harassment(2)

63 Employment Issues: Academic freedom(2), disciplinary action(4), discrimination(1), harassment(1), hiring process(3), job classification(1), job description(1), job duties(2), payroll(1), performance evaluation(4), personality conflicts(3), poor supervisory skills(4), promotion(4), salary/benefits(1), separation(1), student employment(7), supervisor/employee relations(6), tenure(3), termination(2), union(2), work schedule(2), work load(1), other(1), policy issue(6)

198 Miscellaneous: Career advising(7), disability accommodations(3), environmental issues(3), ethical considerations(7), FERPA(3), health concerns(8), interpersonal problems(1), legal issues(9), off-campus housing(10), off-campus problems(22), on-campus housing(26), parking issues(13), privacy issues(6), records retention(2), safety issues(4), shared governance(3), other(13), policy development(50), policy issues(8)



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

Table 4

All Issues (Primary and Secondary) Presented in 2008-09 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	331	7	5	4	76	19	13
Student Academic Status	632	6	12	3	70	7	16
Student Conduct	241	24	28	4	21	4	2
Classroom Instruction	416	44	4	0	32	14	0
Faculty/Staff Performance	464	116	25	121	55	14	5
Employment Issues	98	124	36	143	0	10	2
Miscellaneous Concerns	421	93	44	48	54	78	31

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

Table 5

All Issues (Primary and Secondary) Presented in 2008-09*

Financial Concerns: Contracts(36), emergency funding(11), encumbrances(48), evictions(3), fees(18), financial aid(107), fines(21), independent status(9), insurance(26), leases(27), parking tickets(4), paycheck(5), refunds(33), scholarship(26), tuition(29), tuition waiver(6), other(11), policy issue(35)

Academic: Academic advising(97), academic probation/dismissal(55), add/drop(25), admission(30), certification(10), class permits(4), class scheduling(12), clinical/student teaching course(15), closed classes(7), comprehensive exams(5), credit transfer(23), degree/graduation requirements(76), hardship withdrawal(9), incompletes(21), medical withdrawal(28), placement testing(2), program admission(23), program dismissal(10), registration(46), reinstatement(15), repeat courses(53), residency status(3), SAP(7), staffing/performance review(8), thesis/dissertation(4), transcripts(39), withdrawals(54), other(16), policy issue(49)

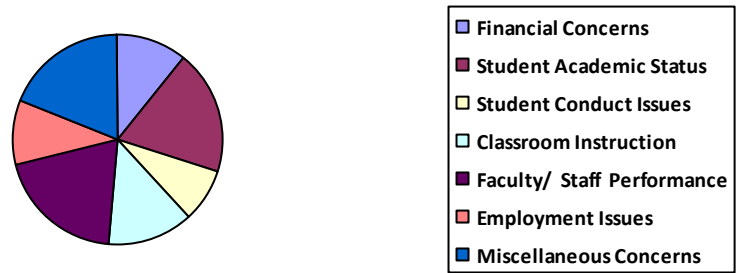
Student Conduct: Academic misconduct(19), alcohol(13), assault(24), battery(15), classroom disruption(4), deceitfulness(10), discrimination(5), due process(27), harassment(23), intimidation(22), judicial system(65), residence hall misconduct(27), roommate disputes(9), sanctions(38), sexual harassment(3), theft(6), other(6), policy issue(8)

Classroom Instruction: Attendance(48), course syllabus(49), discriminatory grading(33), faculty absences(15), faculty office hours(10), final exams(26), grade appeals(106), grade change(39), grading standards(41), make-up work(28), personality conflicts(23), quality of instruction(42), teacher fluency(4), tutoring(7), other(13), policy issue(26)

Faculty/Staff Performance: Deceitfulness(63), derogatory comments(89), discrimination(40), favoritism(47), harassment(16), inaccurate advising(81), inattentiveness(167), incompetence(63), intimidation(60), retaliation(64), retention of tests/papers(25), rudeness(76), sexual harassment(6), other(3)

Employment: Academic freedom(6), disciplinary action(13), discrimination(10), grievance(15), harassment(10), hearing(1), hiring process(23), inadequate staffing(2), insubordination(6), job classification(9), job description(11), job duties(14), morale(20), payroll(3), performance evaluation(25), personality conflicts(33), poor supervisory skills(31), promotion(11), retirement(3), salary/benefits(14), separation(4), sexual harassment(1), student employment(23), supervisor/employee relations(35), tenure(7), termination(13), union(7), work schedule(13), working conditions(3), work load(7), other(2), policy issue(38)

Miscellaneous: Athletics(3), career advising(22), disability accommodations(19), environmental issues(4), ethical considerations(46), FERPA(17), health concerns(88), immigration issues(6), interpersonal problems(39), legal issues(117), off-campus housing(38), off-campus problems(76), on-campus housing(82), parking issues(19), privacy issues(38), records retention(9), safety issues(27), shared governance(10), other(20), policy development(63), policy issue(26)



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

Appendix A

Ombuds Staff Outreach, Service, and Support Activities of 2008-09

Presentations by Ombudsman or Staff

College of Business
Faculty Development Workshop (2)
Graduate School Orientation
International Student Orientation Panel (2)
Presidential Commission on the Status of Women
Presentation to Residence Hall Floor Group
Supportive Professional Staff Council Grievance Committee
Supportive Professional Staff Council Workshop
Teaching Assistant Orientation
Theatre Department Workshop (2)
University 101 and Other Classes (19)

Office Outreach Activities

Benefits Choice Fair
CHANCE Orientation (9)
Employee Wellness Fair
Facebook
Housing Programming Fair
Move-In Day
New Faculty Forum
New International Students Welcome Fair (2)
New Minority Student Reception
Northern Neighborhood (new student orientation) (23)
Organization Expo
Orientation Resource Fair
Office Flyers Posted on Campus Bulletin Boards and in Buses
Table Tents in Residence Hall Cafeterias (2)
Table Tents in Holmes Student Center Cafe
Window Display in Holmes Student Center (2)

Training Sessions Provided by Ombudsman

CAHC 211 Instructor Training (4)
Housing Community Advisors Training
Northern Star Staff Training (2)
Orientation Leader Training
Teaching Assistant Training
Teaching Effectiveness Institute (2)
UNIV-101 Instructor Training
UNIV-101 Instructor Mentor Program
UNIV-101 Syllabus Workshop

Ombudsman Service/Committees

Affirmative Action/Diversity Resources Advisory Committee
Committee on the Undergraduate Academic Environment
Faculty Senate
First-Year Connections Advisory Board
Foundations of Excellence Philosophy Committee
Judicial Affairs Task Force
Operating Staff Council
Presidential Commission on Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity
Pres. Comm. on Sex. Orient. & Gender Identity Campus Services Committee
Presidential Commission on the Status of Minorities
Pres. Comm. On the Status of Minorities Workplace Issues Subcommittee
Student Retention Task Force
Supportive Professional Staff Council
Supportive Professional Staff Workplace Issues Committee
University Council