

2005-2006 Annual Ombud's Office Report

To: ISU Faculty Senate
From: John Gribas, Ph.D., Faculty Ombud

Activities

Consistent with reports of previous faculty ombudpersons at ISU, I have found that work associated with this office is unpredictable and highly variable. Each case I handled differed in how much overall time was required, how much sustained effort was needed for the intervention, etc.

Activity was very slow initially, particularly just after my duties began in the summer of 2005. I believe this was due to both the time of the year and the time required for me to become introduced to the faculty community. Once the fall 2005 semester began, however, I was dealing with at least one case regularly. I recall only once that I had no active cases for a period of approximately two weeks. At times I felt somewhat overwhelmed in trying to handle three or four complicated cases. All in all, I think the amount of release time is sufficient and appropriate to allow expectations to me met.

As the year progressed, I began to distinguish four general types of cases brought to me: (1) one-time contact (usually via phone or email) for information and/or advice, (2) individuals looking to me as a confidential source for one time but extended face-to-face consulting and/or venting, (3) requests for faculty conflict mediation (usually initiated by someone other than those in conflict), and (4) active intermediary/liaison work for faculty with administration focused grievances.

I have kept confidential files for all cases of type 3 and 4. Files were kept for type 2 cases depending on my determination of the seriousness of the issues and/or the wishes of the individual involved. I have generated approximately 20 files for cases in 2005-2006. Some files represent work with single individuals and some represent work with groups of two to five who sought intervention collectively.

By far, the most common issues and the most time and resources used were related to active intermediary/liaison work for faculty with administration focused grievances. This trend and conclusions drawn from my investigations and observations lead me to believe that there are localized but systematic problems related to inappropriate use of administrative authority, particularly at the Chair and Dean level. I see this as a significant concern. At the same time, I have seen steps taken indicating a commitment to correct some of those problems. Additionally, it was good to see how seriously administration at all levels took the role and office of the faculty ombud. In almost all cases, administrators were responsive to requests for meeting and access to needed information, and seemed to respect and respond to recommendations and advice.

Budget

Other than salary related expenses, the ombud's office budget was drawn upon for some equipment needed to perform duties including comfortable folding chairs to meet with multiple individuals in my office and an electronic organizer to keep up on an always changing calendar.

Additionally, I will be using funds from the budget for training at an upcoming Association of Canadian College and University Ombudspersons (ACCUO) conference in Vancouver, British Columbia in mid-May. I also plan to join the International Ombudsman Association and will draw on ombud's office budget funds for membership dues and any associated costs. Current ombud funding is sufficient to meet needs and cover expenses.

Recommendations to Faculty Senate

Stay committed to maintaining the faculty ombud's office. I cannot speak to how well I served in this role, but this year has proven to me the vital importance of it. I also recommend that, when it comes time to choose someone to serve as faculty ombudsperson, the Faculty Senate and ombud candidates work with the expectation of a long-term (multi-year) commitment, even if there is a yearly reappointment consideration. This is definitely a job one must grow into. I believe that, regardless of a person's background and training, it will take at least an entire year for a new faculty ombud to orient to the position and for faculty to develop awareness and trust of the ombudsperson. Multiple years in the position would allow an ombud to develop needed experience and credibility, build relationships with faculty and administration, obtain training in skills specific to ombud duties, and begin to recognize university-wide patterns which is necessary to advocate for helpful systemic changes.

Do whatever is within your charge to pursue a system for more complete and meaningful administrative performance evaluation, especially at the Chair and Dean levels. Chair expectations and duties and boundaries for Chair authority seems spelled out well in the faculty handbook, but current Chair evaluation systems do not seem equally clear. It is my observation that Deans function in almost total autonomy and isolation. Such a system is not fair to them or anyone else. Administrative quality control is not possible without thorough, regular, candid feedback from all stakeholders in the organization. Historically, ISU Deans appear to answer only to higher level administration which, structurally, has little to no opportunity for observing or assessing important personnel performance expectations. The new online Dean assessment survey put in place by Dr. Wharton is an excellent step in right direction. Even so, I urge the Faculty Senate to partner with Dr. Wharton in developing plans for follow up to the online faculty input processes. Input alone is not necessarily participation or transparency. Consider the Boise State Dean evaluation process as model (see <http://policy.boisestate.edu/index.asp?section=5&polycinum=5385>).

Work with upper administration to develop a system for exit interviews or some other system for collecting information from faculty who are leaving/have left ISU. There seems to be widespread campus agreement that faculty are leaving due to salary concerns. That may be true, but my work this year has shown me that faculty are also leaving because of workplace satisfaction problems. It appears that a good deal of these problems relate to faculty perceptions of administrative unresponsiveness, inappropriateness, ineffectiveness, and general weakness. Without feedback from our colleagues who leave ISU, we will never be able to investigate such problems and, if warranted, remedy them.

Goals and Plans

I thank the Faculty Senate for the opportunity to serve the ISU community. If reappointed for the 2006-2007 academic year, I would remain committed to serving to the best of my ability. In addition, I would pursue the following goals:

- Find ways to clarify the nature and extent of ombud services. There is some confusion about the fact that this office is designed to serve ISU faculty rather than staff or students. Additionally, some faculty appear to hope for the ombud to offer one-sided advocacy rather than impartial mediation.
- Develop the ombud's office web page. Such development might, in fact, assist in accomplishing the goal listed above. If reappointed, I plan to dedicate time this coming summer to web page development.
- Participate in training opportunities for personal skill development. The ACCUO conference this May is the first step toward this goal, and if reappointed I would plan to attend one or two professional ombud conferences/training sessions yearly.