

2006-2007 Annual Ombuds Office Report

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

Activities

Consistent with my own 2005-2006 annual report and reports of previous faculty ombudpersons at ISU, work associated with this office this year was 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. Even so, ombuds activity was more consistent overall than in 2005-2006. I assume this was because I already had a year of introduction to the university community. I also succeeded in developing a new ombuds office website (see <http://www.isu.edu/ombud>). This site has useful information about the services provided through the office and could have played a part in the more consistent flow of ombuds office activity.

I have found that the high degree of confidentiality required in this position can work against the need to make the faculty community more aware of the office and its services. Based on feedback from those I have served, I think that awareness of the office is growing without jeopardizing any sense of confidentiality. And though my work was more consistent this year, I believe that the amount of release time is sufficient and appropriate to allow expectations to be met.

I 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 extended (usually face-to-face) consulting and/or venting, (3) faculty conflict mediation, 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 generated approximately 15 files for cases in 2006-2007. This is a somewhat smaller number of cases than in 2005-2006. I believe there are a couple of reasons for this result. First, in my initial meeting with President Vailas early in the academic year, he emphasized that he wanted to be sure that the ombuds office did not take the place of established administrative functions and roles. He indicated that he believed that it was the job of appointed administrators (chairs, directors, deans, provosts) to respond to personnel concerns. He also indicated that if faculty members believe that their concerns are not addressed fairly or satisfactorily with an administrator, then they should take the issue to the next higher level of administration. Dr. Vailas urged me to encourage those who sought my assistance to exhaust this chain of command before moving to active alternative dispute resolution via the ombuds office. Looking back at my first year in the position (2005-2006), I believe that I did become involved in some cases that might have been effectively handled by an established administrator. Therefore, while I still believe that many issues for many different reasons simply cannot be properly addressed through established administrative channels, I did do my best to respect Dr. Vailas' request, and I think this reduced the number of type 3 and type 4 cases in 2006-2007. At the same time, I handled far more type 1 and 2 cases this year than in 2005-2006.

In addition to traditional ombuds services to faculty, I served in my capacity as ombudsperson on the Presidential Task on Diversity in the Spring 2007 semester.

Budget

Other than salary related expenses, the ombuds office budget was drawn upon to fund travel, registration, food, and lodging needed for training in Orlando, FL conducted by the International Ombudsman Association (IOA). So long as I retain this position, I also will draw on ombuds office budget funds for IOA membership dues and any associated costs. Current ombud funding is sufficient to meet needs and cover expenses.

Recommendations to Faculty Senate

Clarify among yourselves and with President Vailas your expectations of and commitment to the ombuds office. As indicated above, my interactions with Dr. Vailas lead me to believe that he has some concerns about the potential for the ombuds office to inappropriately supplant established administrative channels and responsibilities. I think those are reasonable concerns. However, I also believe that the ombuds office serves an indispensable function. Perhaps an official statement by the Faculty Senate and shared with President Vailas on the need for and scope of the ombuds office would be profitable.

On a related note, my interactions with Dr. Vailas lead me to believe that he does not think it is appropriate for him to have any official oversight with the faculty ombuds office. Historically, the Faculty Senate has made a recommendation for the ombudsperson appointment to the university president, who then made the official appointment. My sense is that Dr. Vailas would like the university president to be taken out of that process. I assume this would leave the Faculty Senate with complete oversight and authority in ombuds office matters. I appreciate President Vailas' respect for Faculty Senate's authority in this office. However, I also worry that, without any official "sign off" by the top university administrator, the ombuds office could lose its legitimacy. I also would want to explore whether being untethered from the Office of the President would jeopardize ombuds office funding. So I encourage Faculty Senate to discuss and explore these matters so as to come to some kind of mutual understanding with President Vailas.

As with the 2005-2006 report, I urge the Faculty Senate to continue to push for better systems of complete and meaningful administrative performance evaluation. The online Dean assessment survey established by Dr. Wharton is in place. I have not received any feedback about the degree to which it is being used or about its perceived effectiveness or credibility. However, regardless of individual opinions on the decisions, recent changes in college Dean appointments appear to indicate that administrative performances at that level are being scrutinized. I still see a serious need for better Chair level evaluation. In particular, I think it is vital that Chair evaluation reflect the role as defined in the Faculty and Staff Handbook:

Recognizing the dual role a chairperson performs in the academic community, first as a member of the faculty and second as an administrator, it is understood that while the chairperson performs an essential administrative function, each of the duties and responsibilities assigned to the chairperson is carried out in a spirit of cooperation with the department faculty.

(from Appendix B. I., <http://www.isu.edu/fs-handbook/appendix/appb.html#1>)

I determine that the majority of complaints that came my way in 2006-2007 could be traced at least in part to a faculty member's perception that his/her Chair was not functioning in the spirit of this role definition.

Goals and Plans

Once again, I thank the Faculty Senate for the opportunity to serve the ISU community in this capacity. For the 2007-2008 academic year, I will remain committed to serving to the best of my ability. In addition, I will pursue the following goals:

- Continue to assist in clarifying the nature and extent of ombuds office services. At this point, I think it is clear to the ISU community that the office serves faculty (rather than staff or students). Some faculty still come to me with the expectation that the ombud is one who will offer one-sided faculty advocacy rather than impartial mediation, and I will continue to seek ways to deal with that misperception.
- Continue to develop the ombuds office web page. There are good online resources available through other university ombuds office websites and through the International Ombudsman Association.
- Continue to develop ombuds skills through participation in at least one training event at IOA meetings or other professional venues.