

2007-2008 Annual Ombuds Office Report

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

Activities

This, my third year as ISU Faculty Ombudsperson, was by far the most unpredictable and variable in terms of work activity. I experienced a few extended periods of almost complete inactivity. On the other hand, there were a number of times that I was challenged with making time to adequately respond to the requests for assistance. The types of cases I handled were much in keeping with previous years; however, there were a greater number of what I would consider very serious issues requiring more extended and intensive intervention.

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 keep confidential files for all cases of type 3 and 4. Files are 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 16 files for cases in 2007-2008, approximately the same number as in the previous academic year. Files are kept secured in a locked file cabinet in my office. At the end of each academic year, all file materials related to cases that are not ongoing are destroyed (shredded).

No files and only two initial requests related to type 3 cases (faculty conflict mediation). Though a deviation from previous years, I do not see this as problematic. Based on my experiences with type 3 cases, I believe that conditions for successful direct mediation between colleagues in dispute (e.g., dispute has been present for a shorter rather than a longer period of time, neither party insists that the other should be punished, participation in mediation is voluntary for both parties, etc.) are rarely attainable. The functional independence, work autonomy, and job security experienced by most faculty create dynamics that allow some to insist on their "pound of flesh" rather than to seek for mutually satisfying problem resolution or harmonious working relationships. There is little an ombuds office can offer to encourage feuding faculty to focus on getting along rather than on getting even. Settling such situations requires the involvement of those (chairs, deans, provosts) with institutional authority, something an ombudsperson does not and should not possess.

I served in my capacity as ombudsperson on the Presidential Task Force on Diversity in the Spring 2007 semester. Since then, that task force's recommendation to establish a Faculty and Staff Diversity Center was approved, and I have remained involved as a member of the center's advisory council. I also set up and now manage the center's web site (www.isu.edu/facstaffdiversity).

Budget

The bulk of expended funds from the ombuds office budget was used for salary related expenses. The ombuds office budget also was drawn upon to fund travel, registration, food, and lodging needed for training in Chicago, IL sponsored by the National Communication

Association. I attended training workshops related to conflict coaching and the application of the Coordinated Management of Meaning perspective for promoting peaceful dialogue and managing conflict. At the training, I also established connections with a number of other university ombudspersons. I moved departmental offices early in the academic year which provided me with a larger and more comfortable space for ombuds meetings. I purchased a few furniture items (table, coat rack, file cabinet, etc.) to make the space more comfortable and inviting. So long as I retain this position, I also will draw on ombuds office budget funds for International Ombudsman Association membership dues. Current ombud funding is sufficient to meet needs and cover expenses.

Recommendations to Faculty Senate

The difficulties of dealing with faculty colleagues in conflict discussed above has some implications. First, I think it will be important for anyone serving in this ombuds office to avoid investing undue time and effort in interpersonal mediation attempts. Relatedly, it will be important for the Faculty Senate, as overseers of the ombuds office, to understand this. Instead of serving as conflict mediator, the faculty ombudsperson can more effectively serve as a conflict coach. Conflict coaches help people individually, assisting them in gaining perspective on their situation and assessing strategies for handling the conflict. I participated in some conflict coaching training in November of 2007 and have been trying to apply that training since. While direct mediation has the potential to be effective in rare cases when certain conditions are met, I believe that conflict coaching has much greater potential as a tool for an ombudsperson handling faculty colleague disputes.

A second implication relates to administrator selection and performance evaluation. As indicated above, when faculty colleague conflict impacts performance or job satisfaction or work climate, it often requires the attention of someone with institutional authority. Administrators with such authority (chairs, deans, provosts) are clearly busy with the management of financial, physical, and personnel resources. However, they are also the individuals with the necessary insight and authority to oversee personnel dispute resolution. If this is to be an expected facet of administrator responsibility, it must be seriously considered as an explicit criteria for administrator selection and ongoing performance evaluation. This expectation is suggested in the Appendix B.III.A.1. in the Faculty Handbook which states, "Each department shall develop its own form of evaluation of the chairperson which may include. . . b. Effectiveness in dealing with faculty problems and student problems." However, the statement "dealing with faculty problems" is quite vague and also only indicates that such a criteria "may be" included in a department's annual evaluation system. My own experience and reports from numerous others from different colleges and departments leads me to believe that very few if any chair evaluation systems focus meaningfully on effective management of colleague conflict. As mentioned above, faculty independence and autonomy make it possible to avoid or ignore such conflict, but not without consequence. The insights I have gained as ombudsperson have convinced me that unresolved colleague conflict erodes work climate for all, severely works against attracting and retaining good faculty, and often puts students in very awkward and unfair positions.

I see this as a systematic problem that should be addressed by the Faculty Senate. This observation is consistent with suggestions made in earlier annual ombuds office reports related to the need for more meaningful administrator evaluation. In those earlier reports, I noted that

Dr. Wharton had begun an online Dean assessment survey but that I had no knowledge of its actual use or usefulness as an evaluation tool. With turnover at the Provost level, it is possible that no Dean evaluation system exists. I also noted previously that Chair evaluation systems do not appear to hold Chairs accountable for fulfilling their role as defined in Appendix B.I. of the Faculty and Staff Handbook which emphasizes that the Chair functions "first as a member of the faculty and second as an administrator" and that Chair administrative functions must be "carried out in a spirit of cooperation with the department faculty."

Because of these issues, I again urge the Faculty Senate to explore ways to push for the establishment and utilization of more complete and meaningful administrative performance evaluation systems. If it is determined to be within the Faculty Senate's role in shared governance, perhaps work could be done with the Provost's office to establish an administrative assessment oversight committee. Such a group might help develop and/or further the online Dean assessment survey established by Dr. Wharton. It might also help establish some standards for department Chair evaluations that explicitly include criteria related to handling of faculty conflict and that hold individuals in that office accountable for carrying out duties in ways consistent with Faculty Handbook definitions of the role.

I also urge the Faculty Senate take steps to clarify some issues related to the ombuds office. In the 2006-2007 annual ombuds office report, I noted the following:

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.

To my knowledge, no action has been taken on this issue. Relatedly, there appears to be little authoritative documentation outlining ombudsperson selection, expectations, evaluation, and compensation. What exists is quite general and possibly in error. For example, the Faculty Handbook defines the position as "half time" when, in fact, it constitutes the equivalent of half of a normal teaching load which would be 30% time. The Faculty Handbook also still identifies a one year term of service though Faculty Senate voted some time ago to change that to a three-year term. I would be happy to assist Faculty Senate in establishing some clearer guidelines, though I believe that it would be inappropriate for me, as acting ombudsperson, to have a primary role in making any decisions about defining/redefining the functions and terms of this office.

Goals and Plans

Once again, I thank the Faculty Senate for the opportunity to serve the ISU community in this capacity. For the 2008-2009 academic year, I will remain committed to serving to the best of my ability. In addition, I will pursue the following goals:

- If the Faculty Senate deems it appropriate, I will assist in the establishment of clearer and more formally approved ombuds office guidelines. At a minimum, I will follow through with current efforts to work with the Provost and the Budget Office to formalize a policy for recalculation of a faculty member's salary at the time he/she steps out of the ombudsperson role and back into a full-time departmental faculty role.
- Continue to develop the ombuds office web page. This would be particularly necessary if action related to the above bullet point is taken.
- Continue to develop ombuds skills through participation in at least one relevant professional training event.