

2008-2009 Annual Ombuds Office Report

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

Activities

This year as ISU Faculty Ombudsperson was quite consistent with the previous year (2007-2008) in terms of the unpredictability and variability of activity. My own experiences and ongoing communication with staff at other university ombuds offices lead me to conclude that "non-typical" is typical for this sort of service work. As before, I experienced a few extended periods of relative inactivity, while there were other times when I was challenged with numerous and complicated requests for assistance.

In my 2007-2008 report, I noted that I had handled a number of what I would consider very serious issues requiring extended and intensive intervention. That was less so the case in 2008-2009. In 2008-2009, some of those ongoing serious issues escalated beyond the point of ombuds assistance; they moved into formal institutional channels of grievance or even into legal considerations. Other issues appear to have been resolved through appropriate administrative attention. I use the phrase "appear to have been resolved" since my office's commitment to confidentiality, neutrality, and informality often leave me in the dark on the final resolution of issues and cases. This is appropriate for an ombudsperson, but it does give me limited perspective to offer comment on the degree to which issues that have been brought to my attention ultimately result in successful resolution.

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, problem solving, 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. 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).

I generated 10 files for cases in 2008-2009, noticeably fewer than in previous years. I believe that part of this is due to the amount of administrative change and the serious economic challenge facing the institution as a whole. My sense is that, when large-scale institutional problems are apparent and individuals are sincerely concerned about employment cuts, program justifications, salary reductions, etc., the kinds of issues one might take to an ombuds office pale a bit in terms of an overall sense of import. Though this phenomenon may temporarily ease the workload for an ombuds office and prevent distraction for some administrators, I see it as an unwelcome and unhealthy situation. Large scale institutional concerns may divert attention from less visible, more local and subtler conflicts, problems, or ethical concerns, but those issues continue to exist "under the radar" and will rarely just go away with ignoring. I expect that many such issues will remain unresolved and could potentially

fester and surface at a later date once the more obvious and larger scale institutional challenges settle.

In previous reports, I have noted that conditions for successful direct mediation between faculty colleagues in dispute are rarely attainable for a variety of reasons. I have also pointed out the understandable but problematic tendency for some administrators to too quickly seek the ombuds office and direct mediation for resolving colleague conflict. My observations were validated in an article ("When Supervisors Refer Employees for Mediation, or 'Can You Take This Mess Off My Hands?") published in the August 2009 issue of the International Ombudsman Association newsletter. Even so, I did maintain type 3 case files and became involved in some ongoing efforts to deal with colleague conflict through the 2008-2009 year. However, rather than serving as a sort of external professional mediator for an administrator, I sought to assist all involved with problem solving, functioning more as a conflict coach and engaging in some shuttle diplomacy. These approaches seem to be highly successful and satisfying and are becoming what I see as my primary conflict management tools.

I continue to serve in my capacity as ombudsperson on the advisory council for the Faculty and Staff Diversity Center, and I continue to 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 San Diego, CA sponsored by the National Communication Association. I attended training workshops related to ombuds strategies, conflict management, and productive dialogue. I also continued to build professional relationships and network with other university ombudspersons. I also 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

I applaud the Faculty Senate for all the hard work in 2008-2009. This appears to be a very challenging time in ISU history. These challenges bring numerous issues to the forefront demanding immediate attention. With limited time available for service, members of the Faculty Senate are hard pressed to even respond sufficiently to these immediate concerns. Even so, I worry at times about the institutional impact of the "tyranny of the urgent." I do not wish to suggest that Faculty Senate could or should change its agenda, but I encourage them to consider the following observations while they continue to press on.

As noted in last year's report, I think it is important for the Faculty Senate, as overseers of the ombuds office, to recognize the limitations of ombuds facilitated interpersonal mediation attempts. The faculty ombudsperson can more effectively serve as a problem solving facilitator and conflict coach and needs to be viewed as such. Acknowledging such a perspective would impact assessment of ombudsperson performance and any future ombuds office staffing selection.

Consider how the Faculty Senate could have a direct hand in further development of meaningful administrator performance evaluation. This is a theme reflected in my reports from the past few years. Turnover and uncertainty at the Provost level has made progress on this issue very difficult at best. However, with a new Provost in place, I believe this would be a good time to make some headway. I encourage the Faculty Senate to review the observations and suggestions related to administrator evaluation outlined in the 2007-2008 Annual Ombuds Office Report (see <http://www.isu.edu/ombud/reports.shtml>).

Finally, I urge the Faculty Senate to stay committed to supporting the faculty ombuds office. I see it as a very important support office, especially in difficult times like the present. Support can take many forms. One would be for Faculty Senators to make sure they are familiar with philosophy, functions, services, and limitations of the faculty ombudsperson. If you have not done so, please visit and review the material on the Faculty Ombuds Office web site (see <http://www.isu.edu/ombud>). Encourage your colleagues and constituents to utilize the ombuds office. Another way to support the faculty ombuds office would be to establish a subcommittee to revisit the purpose and expectations of the faculty ombudsperson. As noted in a previous annual report, there is little authoritative documentation outlining ombudsperson selection, expectations, evaluation, and compensation. What exists is general and may even be incorrect. 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. This is a time of limited resources and cutbacks. Without clearer definition of purpose and practice, I fear that a faculty service office such as this one could be vulnerable.

Goals and Plans

Once again, I thank the Faculty Senate for the opportunity to serve the ISU community in this capacity. For the 2009-2010 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.
- I will continue to develop the ombuds office web page. This would be particularly necessary if action related to the above bullet point is taken.
- There appears to be broad recognition that grievance options for faculty are limited and policy outlining those options is at best unclear. I will continue to pursue ongoing efforts to work with HR and the Provost's office on this matter.
- I will continue to develop ombuds skills through participation in at least one relevant professional training event.