

2009-2010 Annual Ombuds Office Report

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

Activities

I have noted in previous annual reports that ombuds office work is always "non-typical." However, 2009-2010 was for me unique in its distinctiveness. As always, I experienced a few extended periods of relative inactivity, but, for the most part, the ombuds office received regular contact from faculty with concerns and questions about policy—whether policy existed, what policy applied in particular circumstances, how policy was to be interpreted, how new policy was to be instituted, etc.

These questions seemed to me to stem from uncertainties recently introduced into the institutional environment from a variety of sources. I do not believe anyone would deny that the university community is experiencing serious challenges related to economic limitations and organizational changes and tensions. Unfortunately, these dynamics and the ensuing uncertainty resulted in a year as ISU faculty ombudsperson characterized by intense frustration. Frustrations about policy changes or lack of policy or the appearance of overlooked or inappropriately applied policy led many to seek my assistance. Often, I experienced frustration when I found myself unable to offer satisfying clarification for others as policy was often nonexistent, under formal debate, or in the process of revision. When I am unable to help, I often encourage faculty to seek assistance from those in more formal positions of institutional authority: chairs, directors, deans, vice presidents, etc. Sadly, this encouragement most often went unheeded due to a general climate of administrative mistrust. It was my sense that most faculty were working with the belief, rightly or wrongly, that appearing on “administrative radar” in any way could lead to negative consequences (primarily some form of feared retaliation). Faculty seemed resigned to the frustrating conclusion that accepting the situation that led them to my office was less problematic than the possibility of inciting administrative ire.

In terms of keeping record, 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).

As a result of the dynamics discussed above, particularly the overall climate of administrative mistrust, my efforts with concerned faculty focused primarily on being a confidential listener and on helping faculty find ways to reframe and/or accept their situation. I generated only seven official files for cases in 2009-2010. As noted in my previous year’s report:

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.

This is not to suggest that the number of individuals I assisted during the year was low. In fact, I estimate that I connected with a larger overall number of concerned faculty during 2009-2010 than in previous years. But my assistance in most cases was limited to activity consistent with type 1 and type 2 cases.

Partly because of limited potential to actively assist faculty and partly because of the need for good policy development, I chose to invest a good deal of time into working with the EEO/Affirmative Action office director and others in drafting policy related to bullying, harassment, and retaliation. Also, I continued to serve in my capacity as ombudsperson on the advisory council for the Faculty and Staff Diversity Center, and I served on the President's Council on Diversity.

Finally, one of my most successful and potentially valuable efforts was the drafting of a Faculty Ombuds Office charter, outlining a clearer definition of the roles, responsibilities, limitations, selection, and oversight of the ISU faculty ombudsperson. This charter was drafted in cooperation with the Academic Affairs Office and Faculty Senate and is currently under consideration by the Faculty Professional Policies Council. Part of this effort resulted in a reworking of the ombuds office budget and resulted in a \$15,000 to \$20,000 yearly savings.

Budget

Expended funds from the ombuds office budget were used for salary related expenses and for International Ombudsman Association membership dues. Because of university wide funding limitations, no funds were used for travel and/or training. In fact, it was determined that keeping yearly travel and training funding in the ombuds office budget is inappropriate at this time given the fact that many faculty are not being funded for needed professional travel. It is hoped that funding for ombuds training and travel will be available through other channels and may be added to the ombuds budget in the future when the current financial crisis is weathered. Even with the significant budget reductions suggested above, current ombud funding is sufficient to meet needs and cover expenses.

Recommendations to Faculty Senate

Once again, I applaud the Faculty Senate for all the hard work. In particular, it was my observation that Dr. Alan Franz as Faculty Senate Chair proved exceptionally reasonable, diplomatic, and peace-promoting in his dealings with upper administration and the entire ISU community. At the same time, he and the rest of the Faculty Senate appeared to work together through very difficult issues honestly and fairly. This continues to be a very challenging time in ISU history. As Faculty Senate works to help meet these challenges, I encourage them to consider the following.

First, as noted in previous reports, I encourage Faculty Senate to consider how it could further the development of more regular, consistent, and meaningful administrator performance evaluation. From my perspective, this remains a glaring omission and necessary addition for greater institutional health. Lack of meaningful administrative performance feedback is, most of all, unfair to administrators themselves. Performance improvement and positive administrative change is not possible without honest and regular feedback.

Second, I encourage Faculty Senate to focus as much time and resources as possible on the development of needed and useful policy. My sense is that existing policy is often woefully inadequate, and it will take the effort of many to remedy this. I know the Faculty Professional Policies Council has limited resources (membership, time, etc.) and is likely overwhelmed with a backlog of responsibilities while trying to respond to demands for quick response. Perhaps it would be possible for Faculty Senate to temporarily expand Faculty Professional Policies Council membership or to empower the council to establish ad hoc subcommittees/taskforces to deal with current policy development demands.

Finally, I urge the Faculty Senate to maintain as much as possible a cooperative posture toward upper administration in regard to policy development and reorganization efforts. It is my observation that there are forces at work outside the control of either upper administration or Faculty Senate that sometimes put these two parts of the university community at odds and lead one group to view the actions of the other with suspicion and assumed malice. Defining and maintaining proper faculty governance will undoubtedly result in some real conflict—conflict that must not be sidestepped. The Faculty Senate's clear defense of faculty governance this past year was, in my opinion, a helpful source of confidence for many faculty in these uncertain times. Even so, I see potential for a focus on internal power struggles to close the door for faculty and administration to work together to respond to external forces of mutual concern. I hope and trust that the professionalism of all will allow the kind of cooperation and respect that will allow this university to thrive.

Goals and Plans

Once again, I thank the Faculty Senate for the opportunity to serve the ISU community in this capacity. For the 2010-2011 academic year, I will remain committed to serving to the best of my ability. In addition, I will pursue the following goals:

- I will follow through in any assistance I can offer to the Faculty Professional Policies Council and others now responsible for the official approval of the Faculty Ombuds Office charter.
- I will continue to maintain and develop the ombuds office web page. Some fairly significant revision will be needed if and when new guidelines (i.e., an approved charter) are in place.
- I will continue work consistent with the ombuds office duties related to development of policy governing bullying, harassment, and retaliation.
- If sources for travel funding are available and it seems possible to use them in a way that does not take away from higher priority needs (faculty research, professional travel, etc.), I will look to develop ombuds skills through participation in a relevant professional training event.