

Report of the Student Ombudsperson for 2007–8

By Leann Pace

The Office of the Student Ombudsperson was established in 1968 by Edward Levi, then Provost of the University, to help students receive fair solutions to University-related concerns. The Ombudsperson and Associate Ombudsperson are appointed annually by the President to serve a one-year term at the pleasure of the President. The Ombudsperson and Associate Ombudsperson are officially members of and report directly to the Office of the President.

	2005–6	Summer 2006	2006–7	Summer 2007	2007–8
Fall	30	0	23	0	23
Winter	23	0	20	0	19
Spring	17	0	17	0	27
Summer	29†	12		10	13
Undergraduate	52	7	29	6	43
Graduate	38	5	23	3	32
Other	9	0	8	1	8
Total	99	12	60	10	82*

Table 1: Case Totals

† Cases from Summer 2005
 *One case appears in both the Graduate and Undergraduate totals.

The primary charge of the Office of the Ombudsperson is to investigate specific grievances brought to the Office by students when the existing channels of communication or dispute resolution have proven unsatisfactory. The specific duties of the Ombudsperson and Associate Student Ombudsperson are: to determine the facts in each case; to refer complaints to the appropriate departments of the University; to suggest remedial steps in the settlement of a complaint; to work with the student and the administrator or faculty member in seeking a satisfactory resolution; and to call attention to any injustices and abuses of power or discretion. If, in the judgment of the Office of the Student Ombudsperson, any given case suggests a need for change to specific University rules, procedures, or policies, the Office will direct its recommendation to the appropriate policy-making body.

The paragraph-long charge of duties recounted above may not impart to the reader a sense of the daily work in the Office. Each case usually begins with a one-on-one exchange with a student; these conversations may take place in-person, over the phone, or via e-mail. These initial information-gathering conversations themselves can have great value because they provide an opportunity for a student’s concern to be voiced fully in a neutral and confidential setting.

After hearing the complaint, the resolution-seeking process can proceed in a variety of ways. In some cases, the Ombudsperson or Associate Ombudsperson will, with the student’s permission, make direct contact with faculty members and/or University

administrators in order to clarify facts of the case or to negotiate a solution. In other cases, we work to empower the student to make these contacts on his/her own. Toward this goal, some students have found it helpful to role play or practice difficult conversations before contacting a faculty member, staff member, or other student with whom they have a conflict. During our term of service, we received conflict resolution/mediation training in order to increase our effectiveness as negotiators and to enhance our ability to teach others to negotiate for themselves.

Some students feel comfortable resolving a situation on their own but reach out to the Ombudsperson for information regarding the appropriate contact person to whom they should address their concern. While most referrals are to University offices, we have come to rely on a few non-University resources, such as the South East Chicago Commission, for assisting students with the non-University housing related concerns.

Much to our delight, we discovered that most faculty members and administrators with whom we had direct contact over the 2007–8 academic year were open to working with us and were committed to reaching fair resolutions to complaints raised by students. It is, however, important to note that a fair resolution, to which the Office of the Student Ombudsperson is committed, does not always coincide with the desired outcome of the student. In these cases, we work to help the student process the outcome of the case and successfully continue his/her academic pursuits at the University.

	2005–6	Summer 2006	2006–7	Summer 2007	2007–8
Academic	42	5	27	5	22
Grades	19	2	12	3	10
Other	23	3	15	2	12
Housing	19	3	15	0	15
Undergraduate	8	0	5	0	5
Graduate	5	1	4	0	7
Off-Campus	6	2	6	0	3
Administrative/Financial	6	0	9	2	15*
Health/Insurance	5	0	4	1	7*
Employment	6	1	3	0	2
Student Services	6	1	4	1	1
Facilities	1	1	2	0	2
Library	3	0	1	0	1
Other	11	1	7	1	19*
TOTALS	99	12	72	10	82

Table 2: Case types

* One case appears in three categories.

While it is possible to categorize most cases according to the student’s primary concern (*e.g.*, academic, financial, etc.), it is important to note that many cases are multi-faceted, touching upon several aspects of a student’s life at the University. For example, while only those cases that primarily involved a bill or loan issue are labeled as

“Administrative/Financial,” cases in other categories such as “Library” and “Employment” often include a financial component (e.g., library fees). In the decentralized university setting, the Office of the Student Ombudsperson is in unique position to act as a unifying location where all the various aspects of a student problem can be addressed. The Office, thus, can act as a conduit between different University offices that may not communicate directly on a regular basis streamlining, the resolution process.

Although I will not offer commentary on specific cases, a few trends do warrant further consideration. The first deals with the make-up of the “Other” category in Table 2. Half of the cases listed in the “Other” category can be loosely grouped as relating to concerns over personal safety. Since we don’t have access to the details of the cases in previous years, it is difficult to ascertain whether this number constitutes a significant change in safety concerns from previous years. The individual circumstances of the cases from 2006–7 vary widely; some deal with safety concerns regarding travel in the neighborhood and police response to safety threats while others focus on safety concerns in relationships between students and in domestic environments. I am heartened by the University community’s continued attempts to address the many types of threats to personal safety and the concern for a student’s well-being during his/her time at the University. These steps are manifested in a variety of programs and movements: the new South Campus police station, c-Alert and the new safety alert protocol, and the student-initiated discussion of the University’s Sexual Assault Policy, to name a few. I hope that University officials will continue to work with students on these and other safety-related matters in the future.

Our involvement with several Area Disciplinary Hearings helped us appreciate the difficult balance that must be struck in these proceedings. While a University hearing is not convened with the formality and associated regulations of a formal legal proceeding, it must be well-organized and formally regulated enough to inspire confidence in the process itself. As the Student Handbook indicates, Area Disciplinary Hearings can be called to review various allegations of student misconduct, from plagiarism to sexual assault. We found that students involved in Area Disciplinary Hearings experienced increased apprehension about the process because the panel is largely comprised of faculty members from their own Division or School. Apprehension can result from a fear that faculty members within a Division already know of the circumstances that led to the hearing and may have preconceived opinions about the situation and/or the student. In response to this concern, we recommended to the Vice President and Dean of Students Office that provisions be made to impanel a fourth faculty member from outside the accused student’s Division or School. This recommendation in no way impeaches the fairness of proceedings under the current standards; the recommendation was made with the hope that including a fourth faculty member from outside the student’s Division or School would inspire greater student confidence in the disciplinary hearing process, decreasing the possibility that students might feel “railroaded” by a faculty panel consisting only of members from their School or Division. This recommendation has not been adopted but we hope that the University will continue to review and improve its disciplinary hearing guidelines.

As the numbers in Table 1 indicate, more cases are brought to the Office by undergraduate students than by graduate students. This statistic confirms my anecdotal suspicion from working in the Office that, on the whole, undergraduate students are more likely to seek help when perceived problems arise in their university lives. This may be due to the fact that there is a more obvious and codified support system in place for the undergraduate population at the University (*e.g.*, College Advisers, housing staff) than there is for the graduate population. Additionally, the number of years that graduate students may spend in a department in combination with the often highly personal relationships that can form with a faculty adviser may make graduate students fearful of registering complaints or concerns in their own departments. They may fear being branded a “troublemaker” or having to share personal information with direct superiors. Whereas an undergraduate might be referred to the Ombudsperson’s Office by a Resident Head or College Adviser, the graduate student who does not voice concern about a University-related problem is also less likely to be referred to a confidential source of help outside of his/her department, such as the Student Ombudsperson. I would encourage future Ombudspersons in conjunction with the Dean of Students offices to find ways to increase advertising for the support systems available to graduate students.

In closing, I would like to thank Geertrui Spaepen for her marvelous work as Associate Ombudsperson in 2007–8 and her continued good work as Student Ombudsperson for the 2008–9 academic year. Thank you also to Sarah Lickfelt, the 2006–7 Ombudsperson, for sharing her expertise with us during the summer transition period. I would also like to thank the staff members of the Vice President and Dean of Students Office for their guidance and cooperation. It was a pleasure to serve as the Student Ombudsperson in 2007–8 and I thank President Zimmer for giving me the opportunity to do so.