AUBURN UNIVERSITY

UNIVERSITY OMBUDS OFFICE

QUAD CENTER, SUITE 005

University Ombuds Office Annual Report
September 2, 2008 - September 1, 2009

Attached are data from the first year's operation of the University Ombuds Office, including number of visitors, employee classification of visitors, and gender. Issues or concerns raised by visitors are tabulated according the International Ombudsman Association (IOA) uniform reporting categories (a copy of the IOA categories are appended to this report). In some places, data are further subdivided according to non-faculty or faculty employee status. In places where this occurs, my intention is to present information in the most meaningful way for the offices overseeing personnel matters for faculty (Office of the Provost) and for non-faculty employees (Human Resources).

When reviewing the data, it is important to interpret the information in the context of how the ombudsperson comes in contact with visitors and how issues are tabulated. Visitors voluntarily contact the office; no one is compelled to interact with the ombudsperson. The ombudsperson serves as a neutral party and does not attempt to conclude the veracity of any statements by parties or determine the facts of what is being described. The issues raised are recorded based on what visitors report and later translated into the IOA categories. Thus, there are no verbatim quotes from visitors nor is there information that might reveal the source of a reported issue.

Visitors

The visitor data presented can only be interpreted as *the number (or percentage) of employees experiencing a workplace concern who have chosen to contact the Ombuds Office as a neutral and confidential means to explore options towards resolving an issue*. The data presented **does not** represent the percentage of all employees experiencing conflict nor the extent to which employees seek other informal methods of resolving conflict.

Approximate usage rates of Ombuds offices at colleges and universities range from 1% to 5% of the constituency population. The usage rate in the first year of the Auburn University Ombuds Office was 2.5%.

Issues or concerns raised by visitors to the Ombuds Office

Issues raised range across several categories for any given visitor. Often, a visitor will have in mind one or few main concern(s) but several other issues will be revealed during the course of an interaction. The Ombudsperson makes no attempt to assess what a visitor's *major concern* or *most important concern* may be when recording issues. Despite this limitation, the data may be helpful to readers in discerning the types and frequencies of issues on the minds of people choosing to explore an informal resolution or other approaches to workplace problems. As is the

case with usage rate, the types of issues raised are very much in line with reports from ombuds offices at other universities.

The 125 visitors raised a total 891 issues (7.1 issues per visitor). The largest IOA category of concern raised by visitors was in the area of *Evaluative Relationships*, issues arising amidst supervisor-supervisee relationships (45.7% of all issues). This observation is a consistent finding in the reports of most ombuds reports available for review.

Pre-dispute versus Post-dispute

The Ombuds Office is designed as an informal mechanism, when appropriate, to address workplace concerns. Thus, an assessment of whether the visitors concern was prior to a formal action (pre-dispute) or after a formal action (post-dispute) was recorded. Of all visitors, 108 (86.8%) were addressing a pre-dispute issue and 17 (13.2%) made contact with the Ombuds Office following engagement in a formal dispute resolution process or after attempting to address their concern with a campus regulatory or compliance office.

Mirroring the response of institutions in academia, private industry, and government, Auburn University on September 2, 2008 established the Ombuds Office as a two-year pilot program to assist employees pursuing informal resolution of workplace concerns or problems. The University Ombudsperson is intended to serve as an *organizational ombudsperson.* There are a variety of Ombuds models all emphasizing that the incumbent has no command authority, functions independently of normal reporting channels, does not serve in other roles that could jeopardize neutrality, and is committed to confidentiality of communications to the extent allowed by law.[a] The distinction of an *organizational ombudsperson* is the absence of the intention or ability to conduct formal investigations, be a finder of facts, publish findings, or render judgments on grievances whereas *statutory* or *classical ombudpersons* are vested with these powers. The University Senate resolution describing the University Ombuds Office and the Standards of Practice and Code of Ethics of the IOA are appended to this report.

I am grateful to those with whom I have visited for their enthusiasm and creativity in pursuing solutions to the problems they experienced. I can also confidently report to our community that when it was necessary to reach out to administrators and administrative offices across campus I was received with the utmost professionalism, cooperation, and eagerness to find a positive outcome for all concerned parties. In particular, the leadership of the University Senate, A&P Assembly, and Staff Council and the President's Office, Office of the Provost, and Human Resources were instrumental in any success the office may have had in this first year.

Respectfully submitted,

Jim Wohl, DVM, MPA
University Ombudsperson and Professor October 6, 2009

a *see Gadlin H (2000). The ombudsman: What's in a name? Negotiation Journal 16(1), 37-48.*

Estimated Ombuds Office Service Population: These estimated numbers and percentages of the university employee population served by the Ombuds Office are unofficial numbers tabulated solely for the purpose of interpreting the visitor data for the University Ombuds Office.

Table 1. Total Estimated Employees (excluding TES): ~ 5010

Classification	number	% total	% male	% female
Faculty *	~1860	~37%	~62%	~38%
Non-faculty	~3150	~63%	~ 40%	~ 60%
A&P	~1495	~30%	~ 49%	~ 51%
Staff	~1655	~33%	~ 34%	~ 66%

* tenure track and non tenure track

Table 2. Ombuds Office Visitor Demographics & Employee Classification
Total visitors = 125

Classification	**Number**	**% visitors**	**% total population**	**% male**	**% female**
Faculty *	54	43.2%	2.9 %	63%	37%
Non-faculty	71	56.8%	2.3%	32.4%	67.6%
A&P	34	27.2%	2.3%	26.5%	76.5%
Staff	30	24.0%	1.8%	26.7%	73.3%
Other	7	5.6%	0.2%		
Total visitors	125	100%	2.5%	44.8%	55.2%

* 76% (41/54) of faculty visitors were tenured

Table 3. Ombudsperson Actions in Response to 125 visitors (multiple actions may be taken with any given visitor).

Action	Number of visitors	Percentage of visitors
Individual consultation / problem solving	90	72%
Referral to policy or campus agency/office	41	32.8%
Unit consultation or mediation	17	13.6%
Notify campus office on behalf of visitor	2	1.6%
Inquiry to campus office on behalf of visitor	17	13.6%
Look into situations, procedures, or problems	6	4.8%
Provide upward feedback to administrators / leaders	10	8%

Individual consultation / problem solving: Listening, providing and receiving information, reframing issues, discussing options for a addressing a visitor's concern rather than choosing for a visitor how to respond. Many visitors to an ombuds office are seeking an impartial listener to assist them in verbally expressing a concern. No further action may be desired or needed.

Referral to policy or campus agency/office: Ombuds officers are in a position to respond to confidential inquiries for referral to appropriate offices or services that are available on campus. The ombudsperson must be well versed in university grievance procedures and have a working knowledge of the appropriate offices responsible for regulatory and compliance functions of the university. This information resource function compliments the ombudsperson's practice of remaining up to date and knowledgeable of current university policies.

Unit consultation / mediation: A visitor may seek the ombudsperson's assistance in finding an intermediary in speaking with another party privately in resolving a conflict – sometimes shuttling between parties and other times through a facilitated discussion similar to mediation. The intermediary may be the ombudsperson or another appropriate person. The ombudsperson may serve as a facilitator with groups when requested and when appropriate or refer multiparty conflicts to facilitation services elsewhere on or off campus. The ombudsperson only serves in any of these roles with the permission of the involved parties.

Notify campus office on behalf of visitor: Under certain circumstances, the ombudsperson may notify a campus office of information on behalf of a visitor in order to surface allegations while protecting the observer's identity or safety.

Inquiry to campus office on behalf of visitor: A visitor may wish to confidentially seek clarification regarding the meaning of a specific university policy or procedure.

Look into situations, procedures, or problems: The ombudsperson does not perform formal fact finding investigations. On rare occasions, the informal practice of looking into or following up on an issue at the request of a visitor wishing to remain anonymous may be undertaken with the understanding that the information may be used in advancing an informal resolution. When looking into a situation uncovers that a more formal investigation is warranted, the ombudsperson will turn the issue over to the appropriate office of responsibility.

Provide upward feedback to administrators / leaders: Throughout the year, the ombudsperson may report observations when series of related concerns are tied to systemic conditions, ambiguities of policy or procedure, or absence of policy. These communications are made while preserving visitors' anonymity.

Table 4. Total Issues Raised by Visitors – IOA Categories
N= 891 issues raised by 125 visitors (mean = 7.1 issues per visitor)

IOA Issues Category	% of total concerns
Compensation & Benefits: Questions, concerns, issues or inquiries about the equity, appropriateness and competitiveness of employee compensation, benefits and other benefit programs.	2%
Evaluative Relationships: Questions, concerns, issues or inquiries arising between people in evaluative relationships (i.e. supervisor-employee, faculty-student.)	45.7%
Peer & Colleague Relationships: Questions, concerns, issues or inquiries involving peers or colleagues who do not have a supervisory–employee or student–professor relationship (e.g., two staff members within the same department or conflict involving members of a student organization.)	9.2%
Career Profession and Development: Questions, concerns, issues or inquiries about administrative processes and decisions regarding entering and leaving a job, what it entails, (i.e., recruitment, nature and place of assignment, job security, and separation.)	9.9%
Legal, Regulatory, Financial, and Compliance: Questions, concerns, issues or inquiries that may create a legal risk (financial, sanction etc.) for the organization or its members if not addressed, including issues related to waste, fraud or abuse.	3.3%
Safety, Health, and Physical Environment: Questions, concerns, issues or inquiries about Safety, Health and Infrastructure-related issues.	1.6%
Services/Administration Issues: Questions, concerns, issues or inquiries about services or administrative offices including from external parties.	6.6%
Organizational, Strategic, and Mission Related: Questions, concerns, issues or inquiries that relate to the whole or some part of an organization.	16%
Values, Ethics, and Standards: Questions, concerns, issues or inquiries about the fairness of organizational values, ethics, and/or standards, the application of related policies and/or procedures, or the need for creation or revision of policies, and/or standards.	5.7%
Total (N=891)	**100%**

Table 5. Issues Raised by Number of Visitors (% of total visitors: n= 125) and subcategorized as percentage of faculty and non-faculty visitors raising concern (see appendix for descriptions of IOA categories)

Selected Concerns Raised by Visitors		Total (n=125)	Faculty (n=54)	Non-faculty (n=71)
1. Compensation & Benefits				
1a	rate of pay, job classification	9.6% (12)	7.4%	11.3%
1c	benefits	3.2% (4)		
2. Evaluative Relationships (supervisory)				
2a	priorities, values, beliefs	25.6% (32)	27.8%	23.9%
2b	disrespect, ruse, crude, disregard of people	30.4% (38)	29.6%	31%
2c	trust/integrity suspicions	25.6% (32)	31.5%	21.1%
2d	reputation, rumors, gossip	28% (35)	33.3%	23.9%
2e	communication, poor quality or quantity	41.6% (52)	44.4%	39.4%
2f	bullying, abusive, coercive behavior	8% (10)	3.7%	11.3%
2g	insensitivity to diversity	8% (10)		
2h	punitive behaviors, retaliation	14.4% (18)	11.1%	16.9%
2j	fairness of assignments, schedules	12.8% (16)	7.4%	9.9%
2k	manner of feedback given or received	12.8% (16)	11.1%	8.5%
2l	supervisor consultation	7.2% (9)		
2m	performance appraisal	12.8% (16)	5.6%	18.3%
2n	unit/departmental climate, norms	23.2% (29)	24.1%	27.5%
2o	supervisor failure to address work issues	28.8% (36)	25.9%	31%
2q	manner of disciplinary actions	11.2% (14)	1.9%	18.3%
2r	inequity of treatment, favoritism	13.6% (17)	18.5%	9.9%
3. Peer and Colleague Relationships				
3a	priorities, values, beliefs	8.8% (11)		
3b	disrespect, ruse, crude, disregard of people	12.8% (16)	14.8%	11.3%
3c	trust/integrity suspicions	4% (5)		
3d	reputation, rumors, gossip	14.4% (18)	16.7%	12.7%
3e	communication, poor quality or quantity	10.4% (13)	11.1%	9.9%
3f	bullying, abusive, coercive behavior	7.2% (9)		
3h	punitive behaviors, retaliation	3.2% (4)		
3i	actual harm or threats of harm	3.2% (4)		
4. Career Progression and Development				
4a	job application selection recruitment	8.8% (11)		
4b	job description after new position	8.8% (11)		
4c	involuntary transfer/change of assignment	6.4% (8)		
4d	tenure/position security/ambiguity	7.2% (9)		
4e	ability to achieve promotion, tenure	15.2% (19)	16.7%	11.3%
4f	rotation/duration of assignment	6.4% (8)		
4h	disputed termination, nonrenewal	6.4% (8)		
4k	career development opportunities, support	7.2% (9)		
5. Legal, Regulatory, Compliance				
5b	business, financial practices	7.2% (9)		
5d	discrimination, different treatment	8.8% (11)		

6. Safety, Health, Physical Environment				
6a	meeting safety requirements	4% (5)		
6i	work related stress (non-interpersonal)	3.2% (4)		
7. Services & Administrative Actions (including external)				
7a	quality of service, accuracy, thoroughness	5.6% (7)		
7b	responsiveness, timeliness	8% (10)		
7c	decisions, application of rules (non-disciplinary)	28% (35)	29.6%	26.8%
7d	behavior of service provider(s)	5.6% (7)		
8. Organizational, Strategic, Mission Issues				
8a	technical management of mission	8% (10)		
8b	leadership, management decisions	24% (30)	33.3%	16.9%
8c	use/abuse or positional power/authority	15.2% (19)	18.5%	12.7%
8d	communication re strategy, mission	8% (10)		
8e	restructuring and relocation	11.2% (14)	13%	9.9%
8f	climate, morale, capacity to function	16.8% (21)	25.9%	9.9%
8g	adaptability of unit to stated changes	11.2% (14)	16.7%	7%
8h	priority setting and funding	6.4% (8)		
8j	inter-organizational work territory	12.8% (16)	16.7%	9.9%
9. Values, Ethics & Standards				
9a	applicability or lack of conduct codes	15% (19)	20.4%	11.3%
9b	values, culture of the organization	16% (20)	24.1%	9.9%
9c	scientific misconduct, lack of integrity	3.2% (4)		
9d	applicability or lack of other guidelines	6.4% (8)		