

## **UW-Madison Ombuds Program for Faculty and Staff Annual Report for Academic Year 2007-2008**

### **SUMMARY**

In this annual report, we describe the origins of the Ombuds Program, how the office is organized and our work, focusing on the past year.

The first section of this report contains data on our 2007-2008 case load: for example, how many people consulted us, the length of their service with the University, their role within the University and the breakdown between men and women. We also address our outreach efforts to teach others about the program.

In the second section of our report we provide a generic description of the kinds of problems we deal with and some concrete examples. We then explain the perspective from which we approach any such problems and the specific steps we take to try to resolve them.

The next section of the report provides information about systemic problems and follow-up actions taken to alleviate them. In addition to helping individual faculty and staff members, we also are charged with alerting appropriate authorities if we encounter systemic problems.

Next we address evaluation of our program's impact on our Visitors and the situations they presented. We also discuss how the Ombuds Program has contributed to the well-being of UW-Madison's faculty and staff and to the institution itself.

Finally, for general information, we include a description of the background and organization of our program.

Our report contains the following sections:

**Summary Data 2007/2008 Visitors and Visits**  
**How We Respond to Problems of Individuals**  
**Systemic Problems**  
**Some Observations on Program Impact**  
**Program Background and Organization**

## **Summary Data-2007/2008 Visitors and Visits**

In the last year we handled 63 cases: 49% of our visitors were academic staff, 17% classified staff, 19% faculty, and a group of 7% were comprised of students. As to length of service, 82% have been employed more than three years at the university. Of the visitors, 67% were women and 11% were from ethnic minority groups.

Many of our visitors contacted us with multiple concerns. Of the identified 249 issues

- 36% concerned problems with various evaluative situations or relationships
- 25% presented conflicts in situations with peers or colleagues or others in the organization
- 15% dealt with career progression and development
- 10% consisted of organizational or more general leadership concerns

The time spent with each visitor varied widely from case to case depending on the issues and number of people involved. For some of our cases our involvement was only for an hour or two while the average was about three hours per case. Other cases could consume many hours over a period of several months.

The following are examples of the types of concerns presented by our visitors:

- conflict with an abusive coworker
- negotiation of leave/parental leave
- stress due to unit reorganization/reporting lines
- receiving appropriate medical insurance /sick leave hours
- a denial of job reclassification for an academic staff member
- a tenure denial
- lack of input and process in making a significant unit reorganization
- lack of clarity in procedures available for review of faculty/staff salaries

In addition to meeting with visitors each year the ombuds reach out to the campus community to introduce our services and gather more information on broad concerns. Last year we met with more than 25 groups or individuals such as CASI's, human resource managers, and department chairs. We devoted over 2,000 ombuds hours to this and saw approximately 1,200 individuals. We feel it is a significant part of our mission to raise awareness for our service and to help take the climate temperature of the Madison campus.

## **How We Respond to Problems of Individuals**

Our goal is to ensure a fair process and fair treatment and we approach problems from a neutral perspective. Our first step is to listen to the visitor's description of their situation, asking whatever questions seem appropriate.

Based on what we hear, we attempt to help the visitor clarify the issues and identify various actions that might be taken to resolve the problem. Some visitors want their contact with us to be kept confidential. In such cases we serve as a sounding board, provide information about University policies and resources, and suggest things the visitor might do. This process may consist of several meetings over a period of time as the visitor's problem evolves. If the visitor wishes, and we believe it is appropriate, we can interview other persons involved in the situation in an effort to clarify the issues and identify possible solutions. In some instances, if everyone is willing, we act as an intermediary in an informal mediation process to seek an acceptable resolution.

If, from our neutral perspective, we believe that these various efforts to resolve the visitor's problem have not produced a satisfactory result, we might, with the visitor's permission, consult with an appropriate dean, director, or other authority to ask for help at that level. In addition, although we do not participate in formal grievance or appeal procedures, we do inform the visitor of her/his rights under University rules and regulations to pursue redress through filing a formal grievance or appeal.

## **Systemic Problems**

Beyond helping individual faculty and staff members, we are charged with alerting appropriate authorities if we encounter systemic problems. Examples of these which have appeared throughout during the five years of the program's existence are: 1) lack of guidelines in Faculty Policies and Procedures for promotion from associate to full professor, 2) termination of a probationary academic staff member who had not received performance evaluations and subsequently didn't have a clear understanding of how supervisory expectations could be met, 3) lack of understanding by several departments that "position vacancy listings" are required before filling a faculty position, and 4) limited training of Principal Investigators. In these instances we followed through by notifying appropriate administrators and encouraging them to address the issues.

Systemic problems such as those listed above can be observed through a review of visitor concerns. Another method of identifying problems is by conducting exit interviews. Exit interviews are not only instructive to the campus in identifying problems that need to be addressed, but also can help employees bring closure

to a sometimes difficult departure. While the Ombuds are no longer formally involved in the exit interview process, we continue to encourage expanding opportunities for faculty exit interviews, and also support extending those opportunities to academic and classified staff. As part of our ongoing responsibilities, we provide opportunities to faculty and staff to informally and confidentially discuss their experiences with a neutral person.

Because a significant number of our visitors presented issues of campus civility and climate which involve themselves, their colleagues and persons in authority, we have joined with others in actively supporting training of department chairs, principal investigators and other administrators to help facilitate their roles as supervisors. We encourage this training when we address campus groups, participate in the orientation for new chairs, and serve as members on several campus committees that address human resource issues. A written statement emphasizing the University support for campus civility could reinforce its importance.

During the last year we have observed several new issues which created difficulties for faculty and staff.

- **Incomplete or outdated web information** – Several individuals have reported problems and frustration in finding information via the web about policies and procedures (e.g. how merit is to be distributed). Oftentimes the information is outdated. It would be helpful if there were annual deadlines for updating critical information.
- **Role of College Equity Committees** – The scope of responsibility of the college equity committees is not well defined. If the committee is empowered to serve as an appeal committee for issues such as merit raises, is it constituted so it can deliver a fair and impartial decision? Is the appeal process well understood? Is the appeal process consistent across colleges?
- **Dealing with Crisis situations** – Guidelines for managing department emergencies (e.g. death of a colleague) would be helpful for department chairs.
- **Stress of Reorganization** – Problems occur frequently as a result of departmental/unit reorganization or physical moves to new locations. The Quality Improvement Office can be a valuable resource during these periods.

## **Some Observations on Program Impact**

The nature of our role as Ombuds makes it difficult to assess our contributions to our visitors or to the University in general. In some cases we know that our visitor achieved what she/he was seeking and we believe that our efforts contributed significantly to that outcome. Most visitors wish their contact with the Ombuds to remain confidential. This means that we could not speak with other people involved, and, therefore, have heard only the visitor's perspective and cannot judge what would constitute a good resolution. Moreover, in many cases we do not know what happened after our contact with the visitor ended, and in those situations involving workplace tensions and other problems that evolve over time, it is difficult to say what constitutes resolution and when it occurs. Thus, in many instances we cannot say whether or not the ultimate resolution of a visitor's problem was a good one. If we look not to ultimate outcomes but to the various ways that we have helped our visitors, there is more to report.

With few exceptions, our visitors have commented on the value of discussing their problems confidentially with someone knowledgeable and with no personal involvement with the matter at hand. During 2007/2008 an analysis of the total methods used with our visitors revealed that

- 87% of the time we served as a "sounding board," clarifying both issues and options, and helping the visitor focus more specifically on what he/she wished to accomplish
- 67% of the time we were able to identify possible approaches not previously considered by the visitor
- 38% of the time we sought information or assistance for our visitor from other people within the University
- 20% of the time we either arranged meetings between the visitor and University staff in a position to help or acted as intermediaries in informal mediation processes to seek acceptable resolutions. We sometimes accompanied the visitor to these arranged meetings
- 8% of the time, with the agreement of the visitor, we contacted the visitor's supervisor for information

## **Program Background and Organization**

The UW-Madison Ombuds Program for Faculty and Staff was initiated in the fall of 2003 as part of the University's commitment to foster a courteous and considerate climate for all University employees. This program is part of the

responsibility of the Vice Provost for Diversity and Climate. The program serves as a safe and accessible place for members of the faculty, academic staff, and classified staff to come for informal, impartial, and confidential means of facilitating dialogue and resolving conflicts. It supplements the Ombuds services to the School of Pharmacy and the School of Medicine and Public Health faculty, staff, and students provided by Ombuds Rosa Garner.

Ombuds Steve Bauman, Peg Davey, Kay Simmons, Jane Voichick and John Mather (who replaced Peg Davey on March 1, 2008) are retired faculty and staff who have served on a part time basis.

Offices are located in Lowell Hall. Faculty and staff can leave a message on the Ombuds office phone requesting assistance. The Ombuds alternate by the week in monitoring the calls and following up with the new cases.

The four person part-time staffing setup here at UW is unusual, perhaps unique. Other universities and colleges with Ombuds programs typically staff them with one full-time person, though some also employ part-time help. The two-fold advantage of the UW-Madison system is that the benefits of diverse working experiences as faculty and staff can contribute to Ombuds work. Each Ombuds gets suggestions from colleagues about how to approach a specific issue at weekly meetings.

In the five years since initiation of the program close working relationships have been established with other offices that provide resources and support for faculty and staff, for example the Employees Assistance Program, the Offices of Academic and Classified Staff and the Equity and Diversity Resource Center. The program is publicized in many ways: through a web site; distribution of flyers and posters; presentations about services to various groups across the campus, including the University Committee, ASEC (Academic Staff Executive Committee), classified and unclassified human resource staff groups, and college level meetings of departmental chairs and administrators. During this last year, about half of our visitors came to us as a result of referrals from colleagues or previous Ombuds visitors.

As we are able, we participate in on-going committees and programs that aim to improve the campus workplace climate, including the Campus Human Resource Working Group and Provost's Administrative Staff meetings, fall employee and chair orientations, the Diversity Forum, and programs that support mentoring.