

Cesar Favila and Deepa Das Acevedo
Student Ombudspersons
The University of Chicago
Annual Report, August 2014

Introduction

“University Life can get complicated. We’re here to listen. We’re here to help.”

This quote from our website’s homepage captures the essence of the Office of the Student Ombudsperson at the University of Chicago. Our office has, since its establishment in the 1960s, served as a valuable resource for students seeking confidential advice and conflict resolution regarding a variety of issues. The Office of the Student Ombudsperson functions independently from any other administrative office on campus. This and the fact that it is student-run maximizes confidentiality and the trust that students place in us when discussing sensitive topics. Furthermore, the office’s principles of informality and neutrality give students agency to resolve their situations as they see fit with the experienced guidance and advice of the student ombudspersons. By informality, we mean that no record is taken of students’ visits, save for some statistics and brief notes on each case, described in more detail below.

In addition to private consultations with students, we also participated in wider University affairs. Since the start of our appointment in February 2014, we have met with leaders in Graduate Student Affairs and area Deans of Students to discuss ongoing collaboration. The Office of the Student Ombudsperson was active in the graduate student focus group for faculty mentoring. We participated in a think tank on responsible social media usage in conversation with student leaders across campus, which was facilitated by Campus and Student Life and the College. We participated in the selection committee for the Director of the Office of Multicultural Student Affairs. We attended this year’s Conversation with University Trustees event. And we attended to one lengthy case in the Unlawful Harassment Panel, on which the ombudsperson serves as a non-voting member. These interactions with leaders across campus allowed us to advertise the Office of the Student Ombudsperson by word of mouth in addition to placing flyers around campus and having the Dean of Students in the University send quarterly email announcements to the entire student community on our behalf.

This year, the Office of the Student Ombudsperson functioned by appointment only rather than by set office hours. Students often emailed appointment requests to ombudsperson@uchicago.edu, and on no more than five occasions called in to make an appointment. Only two cases were handled through email. We used the Best Practical™ Request Tracker system along with our smart phones to manage appointments. As graduate student ombudspersons, our flexible schedules allowed for us to respond to appointment requests almost immediately. We often gave students same-day appointments or at students’ earliest convenience. When not busy with appointments, we reviewed University policies and handbooks, we read

relevant literature passed down to us from previous ombudspersons, and we read material from the United States Ombudsman Association and the International Ombudsman Association websites to stay as informed as possible for our student clients.

Statistics

We attended to a total of thirty-seven cases throughout winter and spring quarters. (A brief report on the summer quarter follows at the end of this report.) We used Microsoft Excel to keep track of the date, whether or not the individual had visited the office before, perceived gender, student status, division/school, international status, broad issue, and a general supplementary note. Of the thirty-seven individuals, only two had visited the office before, and both were male. In fact, we attended to more male students than female, twenty-one and sixteen respectively, though none of the issues they brought forth were related to gender bias, discrimination, etc. As for student status, the majority of our clients were undergraduates—nineteen total. We attended to nine doctoral students, three Masters students, three alumni, and one staff member. We did not follow up on statistics with the two individuals attended through email, and that will be reflected in the statistics given in this report. We heard at least one case from members of every division and school except for the Physical Sciences Division, Booth, Law, Graham, and Pritzker. It should be noted that the latter unit has its own professional ombudsperson team for medical school affiliates, and we referred one relevant case to that office. The majority of our consultations were with domestic students; only five international students made appointments. None of the international student issues were related to bias or discrimination.

The broad issues we kept track of were classified as follows: Academic, Faculty, Staff, Employment, Housing, Finance, Health, Peer, Harassment, Discrimination, Information, Policy, and Miscellaneous. The majority of the cases incorporated more than one of the broad issues, sometimes as many as three. To make sense of the issues more comprehensively, we included a note for every case, explaining the main points so as to observe any major trends.

Major Trends and Recommendations

One of our principle responsibilities as ombudspersons is to be able to isolate the cause of conflict. We have ascertained that in most of the cases we have dealt with, lack of communication was the cause. We were often approached by individuals who wanted advice on how to handle difficult conversations with peers, professors, co-workers, etc. with regards to the host of issues described above. However, three trends stood out which we would like to highlight: the need for an ombudsperson for University staff, timelier discipline in the office of the Dean of Students in the College, and the need for clearer grading policies on syllabi.

We received one inquiry for information from a staff member, and though we handled the inquiry well, we decided, in consultation with the Dean of Students in the University, that it would be best to refer all University staff issues to Human

Resources (HR). In fact, we received a handful more inquiries asking whether or not we could help staff. Because of these requests from staff, it may benefit HR to have their own ombudsperson for University staff in the future. It appears that there are only procedures for employees to put in formal complaints (HR Forms, Policies, & Guides #704) and no venue for staff to seek informal and confidential conflict resolution.

We also noticed that students in the College summoned to the Dean of Students office for disciplinary or other reasons had to wait sometimes up to four days before having their meeting with the Dean's staff. These individuals were almost always summoned without being told what they were being summoned for, which led to nervous speculation in the days leading to their scheduled meeting. In preparation for their meetings, students often set up appointments with us to discuss what the procedures would be when they arrived at the Dean's office, but the individuals were chiefly frightened about what to expect. We believe the untimely process distracts students from their coursework and recommend that the Office of the Dean of Students in the College develop swifter procedures for summoning and disciplining students. We think that students should at least be made aware of what it is they are being summoned for in the initial correspondence so as to avoid mind-boggling speculation. Generally, the sooner these meetings can take place after the initial summons, the better it would be for our students in the College.

Finally, we dealt with several cases concerning students' disgruntlement with grades and grading procedures, the majority of which came from College students. We recommend that a notice go out advising all instructors to be as clear as possible about their grading and re-grading policies in their syllabi. Having been instructors in the College ourselves, we understand that having to attend to re-grades can be tedious and undesirable. However, we would like to remind all instructors that it is our duty to make sure students clearly understand how their work is being evaluated. Instructors should make every effort to encourage students to seek out their explanations, and not intimidate students from coming to speak to them in person about the evaluation of coursework.

Summer Quarter

The Office of the Student Ombudsperson remained open for appointments throughout the summer. We attended to ten appointments that did not show any major trends across campus. However, a cluster of some three students requested information about student health insurance in early July. They were promptly referred to the on-campus insurance coordinators.

We also prepared and planned for Autumn 2014 orientation events with other campus offices and departments, and we purchased new material to advertise our office. At the end of August, the office transitioned to its new staff with Deepa Das Acevedo assuming the ombudsperson position and the hiring of Charles Huff as the associate student ombudsperson.