

ANNUAL REPORT

Office of the Student Ombudsperson The University of Chicago

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Deepa Das Acevedo & Alexis Howard, AY 2015-16

The Office of the Student Ombudsperson was established in 1968 to provide students with a neutral, independent, peer-provided source of information and help in navigating the University. Since then, the Office has experienced a variety of shifts—for example, from being a composition of one graduate and one undergraduate student the office has shifted to being staffed by two graduate or professional school students, and from using “visiting hours” as the primary means of interacting with students the office has shifted to an exclusively appointment-based system. Nevertheless, the primary aim of the Office remains constant: first, to provide students with information they have difficulty accessing themselves, and second, to facilitate the resolution of student concerns involving faculty, administrators, or—less commonly—other students.

The Office experimented with new data-collection methods during AY 2014-15 and 2015-16, as a result of which we do not have reliable statistics concerning the number of cases or case types. However, as in many previous years, two themes stand out: most of the student concerns encountered by the Office were driven by a lack of communication or miscommunication, and a majority of our caseload involved grade disputes. In most instances, we were able to provide students with more information about the grading rubric or professor’s assessment, but the grade itself remained unchanged.

A few cases stand out. In AY 2014-15, we encountered two cases involving the complete breakdown of relations between an undergraduate student and a faculty member where the faculty member also led the department/school/committee in which the student major. We encountered three similar cases involving graduate students and their advisors/supervisors during AYs 2014-16, each in a different division (and one in Pritzker, which we referred to their independent Ombudsperson’s Office). We also encountered several housing disputes in AY 2015-16. Some were related to University undergraduate housing and disciplinary actions while others concerned practices of graduate student housing. We also received several inquiries from students seeking mediation in roommate disputes.

Recommendations

Suggestion #1

Our first suggestion builds on our difficulties experimenting with different data collection mechanisms. Rather than have each new pair of ombudspersons develop and implement a data collection system for the academic year, the Ombuds Office and the Office of the Dean of Students should develop an intake form and documentation system that remains stable year-to-year.

This system would have to accommodate the growing number of cases that are handled entirely over email by being accessible remotely. It would also have to ensure the security of the data that is collected: although the Office has never gathered the names or departmental affiliations of the students who approach us, it has in the past collected identifiable information like division or school, domestic or international student status, and provided for ombudsperson comments on the case. An intake form accessed and (once completed) stored on UChicago Box may fulfill these requirements.

Suggestion #2

A second suggestion is that the Office, together with the Dean of Students and the President, clarify the population the Office is meant to serve. As in previous years we received a few inquiries from University staff, and in 2016 we spoke with the Office of the Provost with regards to a possible counterpart for faculty and staff. However, the question of scope extends beyond the student/non-student divide. For example (and also in 2016), we received an inquiry from the parent of a student attending a charter school under the University of Chicago umbrella.

Suggestion #3

Third, it appears that the Office needs to clarify the scope of its activities. In both AY 2014-15 and 2015-16, we received inquiries from students who wished to challenge either particular University policies or the application of particular policies to their individual cases. In the former type of case, we universally referred the student to Student Government or the appropriate departmental or divisional head responsible for policy formation, while in the latter type of case we usually put the student in contact with the individual with decision-making authority over their matter but did not advocate for a particular outcome. Nevertheless because the Office also provides services that can appear to approximate that of a representative or advocate (attending meetings with students, helping students prepare for meetings or draft emails), students sometimes found it difficult to understand that the Office does not engage in individual advocacy or policy change.

Summer 2016

Over Summer Quarter 2016, the Office will acquire a new Associate Ombudsperson as Alexis Howard assumes the Ombudsperson position. Over the summer quarter, Alexis's first priority will be designing and implementing an improved data collection system that tracks the types of cases that are presented to the Office of the Student Ombudsperson and how those cases are handled. In order to maintain security and remote access, options with UChicago Box and other secure cloud servers will be explored. Additionally, Alexis plans on creating a reference guide that includes basic tips and information for the most common cases as well as an organizational chart of University administration. The intent is to facilitate the transition of the new Associate Ombudsperson and to create a useful tool for the Office of the Student Ombudsperson in coming years.