

# Report of the Student Ombudsperson for Winter Quarter 2000

**By Mike Jerstad**

The first question I am often asked by students is "What does your office do? Can you help me?" Accordingly, I feel compelled to offer some clarification of the role of the Office of the Student Ombudsperson ("the Office"). The Office serves two primary functions: (1) to assist students with their questions or problems regarding University bureaucratic matters, administration, faculty, or staff; and (2) to help students work through personal problems they may have with fellow students or others, academic crises, or other issues that may surface during the course of the academic year. That this is a broad definition of the Office's duties is no accident: it is my hope that, if students are not sure whether the Office can help them, they will assume that it can rather than cannot and will seek out our assistance.

The Office is composed of two individuals: the Ombudsperson (the author of this report) and the Assistant Ombudsperson, Sue Kwan. I am a second-year M.B.A. student, concentrating in finance and accounting. Prior to matriculating, I practiced law in my home state of Minnesota for two years. I attended Tufts University, graduating in 1993, and then Georgetown Law School, class of 1996. Sue is a fourth-year in the College majoring in biology and psychology. She is from Chicago and attended Maria High School. Sue was a member of Student Government during the 1998-99 school year. I would thus like to emphasize that, not only is the Office for students, but it is also composed of students.

With that said, there were a wide variety of complaints and problems during the Winter Quarter. The largest category of problems has been related to academic matters.

## **Academic Matters**

### **Grades**

The most frequent academic complaint relates to a subject near and dear to most students' hearts—grades. In many cases, students have been upset with their grades and wish to know why they received the marks they did, and occasionally how they can get them changed. Furthermore, students have often been reluctant to seek out their professors in person about their complaints, either because they are intimidated by their professors or feel that any discussion would be fruitless.

For example, a student in the College came to us recently to complain of a grade he had received in a class he took in the Autumn Quarter. The student felt throughout the quarter that he was doing well in the class, only to receive a C when he got his grades back. Naturally, the incredulous student wanted to find out why he received such a low mark and to see if there was anything he could do to

raise his grade, particularly since he was in the process of applying to graduate schools. Repeated e-mails to the professor inquiring about the grade, however, went unheeded or were ignored.

What should a student do when he or she has sent multiple e-mails to, or has left repeated messages for, a professor, but that professor has not responded? We offer the following advice. First, the student should seek out the professor and/or teaching assistant as soon as possible—waiting too long may make a clear explanation more difficult for both parties involved and may suggest to the professor that there is no urgency to the matter.

In addition, we recommend making an appointment to meet face to face with the professor rather than sending her or him repeated e-mails. Although convenient, e-mails may not always be replied to, for several reasons. For one thing, the professor might receive an e-mail and not remember who the student was (it can be easy to forget that professors teach hundreds of students each year)—a face can jog their memory. Furthermore, e-mail, while widely used among students, is a relatively new medium of communication for some professors. They simply may not prefer to use it, which would hinder the hopes of a student wishing to communicate via the Internet. Finally, taking the time to meet face to face with a professor will show the professor that the student cares a great deal about his or her grade and has taken the initiative in trying to come to a positive resolution of the situation.

### **Academic Problems**

Another category of academic issues is students who are having problems in a class in which they are currently enrolled. For example, a student came to the Office who had skipped an exam (due to her lack of preparation) and was afraid she would flunk her class. The student was considering dropping the class and was also concerned about what effect this would have on her "full-time" status with the University. Unlike the previously mentioned student, who sought out the Office only after repeated attempts to contact his professor, this student came to us before talking to anyone.

First, a note on procedure. As mentioned at the beginning of this report, we certainly do not wish to discourage students from coming to the Office when they are not sure whom they should consult (indeed, one of our functions is to direct students where help can best be found). We would, however, encourage students in the College (and graduate students who have academic advisers) to first seek out their academic advisers when academic problems arise. Academic advisers are trained to assist students with academic questions and to help them work through difficult situations. They can be a valuable resource at a tough time in a student's academic career.

With that said, we encourage students with academic problems such as these to discuss their problems with their professors (after first conferring with their academic advisers). Students may be pleasantly surprised by the response:

although professors are not obligated to change grading criteria, they may (or may not) provide students with an opportunity to redeem themselves in some way. The previously mentioned student is a good example: after she met with her professor, the professor agreed to count the weight of the midterm she missed toward her final exam.

At a minimum, professors can provide guidance moving forward and can help students focus their studies on the most important material. Furthermore, professors are often more than willing to talk to their students about struggles they are having in class. Both of the students mentioned above were intimidated by their professors and felt nervous about meeting with them in person. Although a personal meeting with a professor can seem daunting, there is no reason to be intimidated: professors are here to help students learn and will often welcome student inquiries.

Finally, we feel some preventive advice is appropriate. Before deciding to take a class, students should know what they are getting into. That is, they should make sure they can handle the course work given their academic load and personal life, and understand the criteria that go into determining their final grade. This can be done through a careful reading of the course description, perhaps a brief meeting with the class professor or teaching assistant, and through word of mouth by academic advisers and fellow students. A more thorough understanding of a class prior to registration will decrease the incidence of some of the problems students experience.

### **Doctoral Student Residence System**

A recent conversation this Office had with a doctoral candidate brought to our attention a final academic issue worth considering: the length of time granted Ph.D. students to complete their dissertations. The candidate called with concerns that she would not be able to finish her dissertation within the time allotted. The specific reasons she gave for this are beyond the scope of this report; however, we were surprised to learn that Ph.D. students are given twelve years from matriculation to complete their doctoral thesis and that this time period may even be extended into what is known as an "extended residence" for an apparently indefinite time period.

We have not done a great deal of research on Ph.D. completion, and so our opinion must be tempered as such. It seems, however, that this lengthy time period could potentially backfire against both students and faculty. When time limits are "generous," students may have little incentive to expeditiously complete their dissertations, and faculty may feel less pressure to supervise assiduously students' progress. This can result in a drawn-out process that may ultimately result in a thesis that is unacceptable to the University, yet has consumed years of student and faculty time and energy.

Perhaps this policy could be revisited. We are not necessarily advocating a revision of the time period in the current policy; however, benchmarks could be

set after completion of the four-year "scholastic residence" to keep students on track. For example, students could be required to: (1) submit a dissertation proposal within two years of completion of the scholastic residence; (2) submit a draft thesis two years subsequent; and (3) submit a final draft two years after that. (These suggestions are not meant to be prescriptive, but are made for illustrative purposes only.) Such a policy would add urgency to the time constraints that currently exist.

### **Administrative Matters**

A second category of problems with which we have been confronted has been administrative issues. Inquiries have dealt with questions from students about how to obtain their grades that have not yet been turned in, how to handle financial aid problems, and how to obtain information about health care issues. In general, we have gotten the impression that some students feel the University bureaucracy is difficult to weave through, and they do not know where to begin in their quest for information.

Of course, we are happy to help students in this situation. Indeed, some problems may require the inquiry of more than one administrative office to obtain the answer, and for some students it may not be readily apparent where they should start in their quest for information. Students should not be afraid, however, of making inquiries on their own as well. For example, if a student has an issue related to tuition payments, the financial aid office or the bursar's office would be a good place to start. Furthermore, we have found that, although the first person (or even the second or third person) a student talks to may not have the answer the student needs, that person can refer the student to the proper person from whom to get the information.

We would also like to point out that the University administration is not inherently adverse to students' concerns, nor is it governed by a set of rules that cannot be altered, changed, or relaxed based on exigent circumstances. For example, recently a student was placed on "restricted status" for not paying his tuition and threatened to have his aid cut off within a short period of time if his tuition was not paid. This situation resulted from a problem not the fault of the student: the private corporation from which he had obtained a tuition loan sent its documentation to the wrong place (the bursar's office rather than financial aid). After discussing his situation with the Office, the student visited the bursar's office, explained his situation, and was told that the problem would be resolved if he got the proper documentation from his private loan company. In short, a problem that seemed inherently resolvable was just that.

### **Residential Life**

We had very few complaints related to resident life through the Winter Quarter. However, an interesting issue did arise early during the winter session. A student who had allegedly had his newspaper stolen in a graduate residence hall (newspapers are placed in a common area in the residence lobby) decided to take

the matter into his own hands. The student placed some anonymous fliers up around the lobby that one student found very offensive. The offended student called the Office to find out if the University was obligated to take action under such circumstances.

An initial problem with this situation was, of course, the anonymity of the offending party: how could discipline be handed down if the perpetrator was unknown? Notwithstanding this issue, however, we called an official with the graduate student housing office to discuss the situation. The official noted that there is not much the University can do given that the flier was not threatening, it was a one-time occurrence, and the University cannot constantly monitor students' speech to make sure it is not offensive. The official noted, however, that custodians will remove fliers if they are placed in unauthorized areas or are objectively threatening to students' well-being. Furthermore, the official had agreed to meet with the concerned student and discuss the situation. (The concerned student did not attend their scheduled meeting.)

We tend to agree with the official. The University simply cannot be charged with monitoring what fliers are placed around all points of the University. Furthermore, it is in students' best interests that they be allowed to express themselves through free speech and discourse, rather than be subject to the arbitrary whims of what some administrators deem "offensive." Of course, a different situation may exist where the fliers threaten students' well-being or where discriminatory sentiment is objectively expressed. Accordingly, students should be on the lookout for such offending fliers and should bring them to the attention of the University or this Office (or indeed, promptly remove them); they should not, however, assume that the University has jurisdiction over all things posted.

### **Miscellaneous Matters**

Finally, we have heard a number of miscellaneous complaints from students, most having nothing to do whatever with the University of Chicago. We would like to emphasize two things here. First, as noted above, if there is a question in students' minds as to whether we can help, please assume that we can and contact us. The worst that can happen is that we will not be able to help or will refer you to the proper authority. Second, matters such as disputes about cable, parking tickets where students deserve them, or questions about warranties on stereos are generally not matters for this Office. If your car overheats and you think your mechanic screwed you, there's no need to contact us—we know nothing about cars!!

Mike Jerstad is the Student Ombudsperson for the 1999-2000 academic year.

## **Case Statistics for Winter Quarter 2000**

### **Academic**

Grade Issues	5
Problems with Advisor	2
Academic Problems	1
Miscellaneous	1
<b>Administrative</b>	
Work Study	1
Financial Aid	1
Registrar	1
Miscellaneous	2
<b>Residential Life</b>	
Dorms/Housing	2
RSO Issues	1
<b>Discipline</b>	2
<b>Health Care</b>	2
<b>Miscellaneous</b>	4
<b>Total</b>	25

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