Summer 'a little slow' for ombudsman

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Reflecting on his second summer as ombudsman to UNL students, faculty, employes and almost anyone else with a complaint about the University, James Suter said, that things have been "a little slow" compared to the same time last year.

"The caseload during the first summer session was down about 50 per cent from the regular school year," Suter said. "Last year the drop was less than 20 per cent." However, he said things had picked up during the second summer session.

The charge of any ombudsman is to receive and investigate complaints against abuses or capricious acts of public officials. Suter has two additional charges: to note and investigate recurring problems within the University system, and to examine existing policies, procedures and rules for their efficiency and effectiveness.

Suter said he doesn't initiate any crusades himself, but makes recommendations to proper channels based on cases he takes.

He said some persons misunderstand the function of an ombudsman.

Misunderstandings

One such misunderstanding occurred the first day Suter was on the job—March 13, 1972.

"My first case was a guy who walked in here with three parking tickets. He said, 'How about getting these parking tickets fixed?' I told him I couldn't help him."

Other persons misrepresent him as a students' advocate, Suter said.

Both in summer months and during the regular year, about 80 per cent of persons coming to see him are students, he said. University employes make up about 15 per cent of his work, with faculty and other University-connected persons the remaining five per cent.

He said he has had alumni call him and try to see if he could get them football tickets (he couldn't).

Advocates equity

"The only thing I advocate is equity," he said. He added he has to take an impartial view of every case, although he is the final judge of which situations to accept or reject.

Suter said one of his most useful tools is the threat of exposure. One case involved a student who came into his office "literally in tears." The student had taken an original Mickey Mouse watch to a local jeweler to get it repaired. The jeweler then "lost" the watch and said he would get the student a new Mickey Mouse watch—which would be worth quite a bit less than the original. Suter contacted the jeweler and told him he would have to return the watch or pay the student its real worth. Within a week, the jeweler found the watch.

Responsible to person

He said he has access to all information the chancellor's office has access to; yet he is "responsible to no one" except the person whose case he takes.

However, he consults with UNL Chancellor James Zumberge at least once a week.

For many persons, the ombudsman's office in 110 Burnett functions as another Help Line. "Sometimes all we have to do is tell people whom to see to get information about solving their problem," Suter said.

About 10 perso a day drop in during the summer sessions, he said, with about seven having problems requiring some work on the part of his office. The number of phone calls requiring action has dwindled to about five a day "if we're lucky," Suter said. During the regular school year, comparable figures are 10-15 calls and 10-15 persons coming in who need help that takes time.

About 1,200 persons came in from July, 1972, to July, 1973, Suter said, adding he has worked on about 600 cases since taking on the job.

He declined to discuss specific cases other than the Mickey Mouse watch incident.

"When you hear a lot about the ombudsman, when what he does becomes campus gossip, he's going about his job the wrong way. People feel threatened," Suter said. "Of course, if you don't do anything, no one hears about you either."

Suter plans to retire from his ombudsman position next July.

James Suter   Photo by Gail Folda