

Students' personal files kept private

By Mark Hoffman

Students point to visitation, alcohol and open door policies as things over which they have little control.

But what of another area governing the student's private life—personal files on the student kept by various UNL departments.

What is put into these files? Who can see them? And do students know these files are being kept?

Student files are confidential, according to UNL administrators, and students are given the authority to determine who may examine the files—providing, of course, they know who has those files and what they contain.

In checking with various UNL departments, the Daily Nebraskan found that a student might have a file kept in a residence hall, the Housing Office, the UNL disciplinary office, Campus Security, the University Health Center, the Financial Aids Office, the Registration Office and the college in which he or she is enrolled.

The existence of a file depends on whether the student has been involved in some way with one of the departments.

For example, a student will have a file at the Office of Scholarships and Financial Aids only if he or she has applied for financial aid.

One would have a file kept by a residence hall and the Housing Office if one is living in a particular residence hall and has violated housing rules.

Individual residence halls and the Housing Office keep a record of offenses—such as a visitation or alcohol violation. Information in these files is kept confidential to everyone except the student and the housing staff, according to Housing Program Assistant Director Ken Swerdlow.

The files contain the same information as sent to the offending student—that being the violation and the punishment, if any, that the student is given, Swerdlow said.

He noted that the only way anyone other than the student and staff members can see the file is with the student's authorization.

Residence halls destroy their files at the end of each

academic year, he said. The Housing Office might keep a particular file if a student has been given a probation extending into the following year, he added.

In the case of a habitual violator or a serious violation such as the destruction of furniture or other UNL property, information might be released to Ron Gierhan, the UNL coordinator of student conduct referrals.

Gierhan, the chief UNL disciplinary officer, keeps a record of these violations and gathers information on the cases coming to him.

If enough evidence is gathered, the student is formally charged with violating a UNL rule. Depending on the seriousness of the matter, the student could receive a warning letter or a notice to appear before the Faculty Senate Judiciary Board for possible suspension.

The Judiciary Board is a tribunal composed of student and faculty members. It decides whether a student charged with a violation of UNL rules and laws is guilty. If so, they levy a punishment.

Information in the confidential file is handled only by Gierhan's staff, the student and the Judiciary Board, Gierhan said.

Confidence is maintained to the point that Gierhan said he "doesn't even answer yes or no if someone asks if the student does have a file."

University Health Center Director Dr. Samuel Fuenning stressed that records at the center are kept strictly confidential.

"Nothing is released without the authorization of the patients," he said, in discussing students who might come to the center not only with illnesses or injuries, but also with mental problems, venereal disease, or to buy contraceptives.

He added that if a student is being treated for a venereal disease, that student's name is reported to the State Department of Health, according to state law. The health department will wish to contact those who may have contracted the disease so that they can be treated.

He added that the health department keeps these names in the strictest confidence.

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