

Ombudsman leaves post after 2-year stint

By Rebecca Brite

UNL's campus ombudsman will resign July 1, after two years as a mediator for University students, faculty, administrators and staff.

When James T. Suter took the job in March 1972, he told Daily Nebraskan reporters he had agreed to continue as ombudsman only until the end of the 1972-73 school year.

Now, a year after that self-imposed deadline, Suter said, that though he is glad to have served, he also is pleased to see his job end.

"It's a very wearing position," he said. "I wouldn't trade the experience for all the money in the world, but I wouldn't give a nickel to do it over again."

The ombudsman position was created by the regents in 1972 after ASUN expressed a need for an independent, impartial advocate to handle problems when going through established University channels failed.

Suter, an associate professor of architecture and planning, was selected by a committee of students, faculty and administrators.

The office is funded by the administration and some student fees, Suter said. He said he believes it also should be supported financially by faculty and staff, as all four groups have access to its services.

Although students compose about 75% of his clientele, Suter emphasized he is not a student advocate.

"I hope to God the position never becomes that," he said.

He also stressed what he believed to be the importance of retaining a faculty member in the office.

"Just about any qualified person could do the job," he said, "but a faculty member would probably have a better understanding of University politics."

The ombudsman's position currently is under evaluation by a committee from the Council on Student Life (CSL).

"It's been two years," CSL Chairman Don Shaneyfelt said. "We need to examine the design and

efficiency of the position (before selecting a new ombudsman)."

Suter said he believes the office has succeeded.

"It's well worth the investment," he said. "In two years, we have been instrumental in saving the jobs of about 20 University employes, and at least 12 others have remained who would have quit otherwise."

"At least 40 or 50 students have remained in school who were going to be dismissed or have to drop out. Policies and procedures have been changed, some administrators have been dismissed and others reassigned. People who were simply lost in the shuffle have been found."

"I won't say we were directly responsible for all this," he added, "but most of it would not have happened without us."

Suter said he is sure the functions of his office have saved the University "well over the \$30,000 it costs to keep us going."

He refused to release specific examples of problems his office has dealt with, claiming it would be counterproductive to his job.

"I trade on reliability," he said. "Confidentiality is the major function of what I do."

"If someone refuses to right a wrong, I may resort to public forum," he said, "but if the problem is resolved, why should I wash the person's dirty laundry in public?"

He added that most of the conflicts he deals with do not result from malevolence on the parts of the persons involved.

"Most problems stem from confusion and lack of communication," he said. "That, and the inability of a large organization to deal with individual persons."

Suter said he had several personal recommendations to make for the office.

"The idea of having a specified term of office is important," he said. "An ombudsman would be ineffective as an institution."

"Also, if a faculty member has the position, he or she should be tenured." He explained the

ombudsman is necessarily "a thorn in the administration's side" at times.

"An untenured faculty person could be in a vulnerable position after leaving office," he said, but added the administration has never pressured him. He does not have tenure.

Suter said he tries to maintain "a low profile."

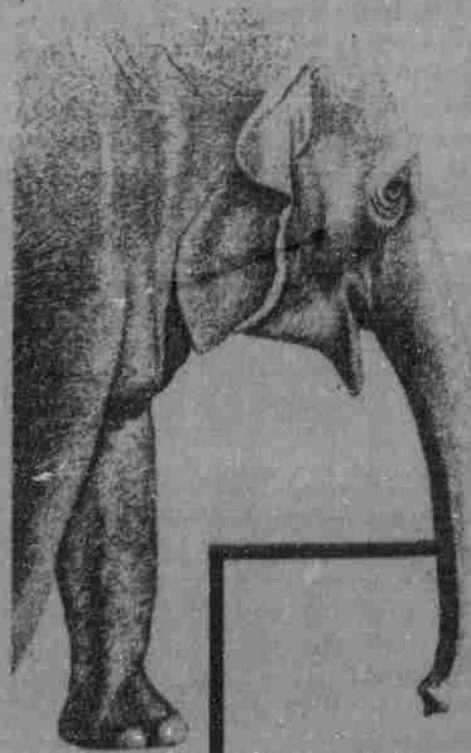
"I like to think I can help solve problems without anyone even knowing I've been there," he said.

"But if students and University personnel think the office is important, I hope they would make their feelings known."



Ombudsman James Suter

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