

## Ombudsman policy to remain neutral

By Becky Brugman

Allan Dittmer cannot replace your mother, but if you need someone to talk to, the UNL ombudsman is all ears.

Dittmer's door is open from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. weekdays, so students can go in to talk over problems. But unlike a mother, he will not take sides.

He said his policy is to remain neutral.

Dittmer and Marilyn Overcast, assistant ombudsman, work together handling students' problems, faculty members and administrators if they seek it, he said.

It is helpful to have the two of us work together, Dittmer said. It is nice to have a woman there, because she often has a different insight into a problem, he said.

"This way, we work together and have two opinions on a problem," he said.

But any problem discussed in the office remains confidential, Dittmer said. No action will be taken on an issue until the person coming in for help gives the go-ahead, he added.

One exception to this policy would be if a student came in threatening to kill his algebra instructor.

### Legal questions

"In that case, I might do something," he said. "I might warn the algebra instructor."

He said in many of the cases where a legal question may play a part, the students will call on the telephone and not identify themselves, he said.

If a student does come into the office with a legal question, and needs advice, Overcast said they refer them to legal aid services.

"Many times a student will come into the office with a problem and all we have to do is listen," she said. "They end up talking themselves into a solution. They just needed someone to talk to."

Sometimes, students take too long to come to the office. They wait so long, it is often difficult to solve the problem immediately, she said.

"We have traced people to different countries and different states to solve a problem," she said, but it would be easier if students with grade complaints would come right in, she said.

Another common problem is students coming in after deadlines have passed. If students wait until the day after student fees are supposed to be in, it complicates the problem more than if they would have come in a day before the deadline.

### Just numbers

Frequently students think they are just numbers, or lost in the university, Dittmer said.



Photo by Bob Pearson

Assistant ombudsman Marilyn Overcast

Surprisingly enough it is usually the students that have been at the university for two or three years that come in and complain about this, he said.

Dittmer said many times students who have been here for a while think they should know more people and that more people should know them. If this is not the case, they feel badly.

The large, unstructured classes also contribute to this belief, Overcast said.

Dittmer said parents call and write letters concerning their children's problems. A student who does not understand the legalities of a contract or document can contact the ombudsmen.

The numbers of students using the ombudsman office increases every year, Dittmer said. More than 800 came in last year and they rarely need to return, he said.

## Problem solvers face the unusual

The absurd, completely unlikely problem of today could be the pressing problem of tomorrow for any UNL student, according to the campus's professional problem solver.

Ombudsman Allan Dittmer said he thinks the nature of people makes unusual situations turn into problems overnight.

An ombudsman, literally translated from the old Norse "ombudsmadr", means agent or representative.

Dittmer said it is difficult to cite previous problems encountered, even if a majority of students have experienced them but he did mention two stories where an ombudsman helped ease the situation.

The first dealt with a student calling about a diploma he received in the mail. The student was enrolled in 12 hours of classes, which he thought he needed to graduate.

He said he felt the diploma was not fair. He had attended the university on and off for eight years and the sudden diploma denied him the opportunity to celebrate and get drunk. The student said it "was like getting a Christmas present in July."

The ombudsman traced the student's record and found the student had taken three courses during different semesters and received incomplete grades. He had no intention of completing the courses. Contrary to normal procedure, all three instructors turned in passing grades to the registrar's office, which made the student eligible for graduation.

Dittmer said the solution was satisfactory to the student, since his tuition for the courses he was enrolled in was refunded.

Although Dittmer said he is not sure, it was assumed the student celebrated the event in the manner he felt most befitting.

Dittmer told a tale about a snow job.

Dittmer said a group of students celebrating the first snowfall started a snowball fight. The group grew and as the snowball fight died down, it developed into a contest to see who could roll the biggest one.

One group was so intent on the project, they failed to realize they were coming to a steep hill. The ball rolled down the hill gaining speed and size.

The students watched the ball roll down the hill finally crashing into a Volkswagon parked on the street.

The car was flattened.

After much persuasion, Dittmer said he convinced the owner to hold off on a lawsuit, while the students raised money to pay for the damages.



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