

Ombudsman appeals student grades

By Sandi Witkowicz
Staff Reporter

When students disagree with university staff members, the UNL ombudsman might be able to help.

The office protects the rights of people who are relatively powerless, said Robert Filbeck, ombudsman for City and East campuses.

Staff members use the office more often than faculty, but students use it most often, he said.

Disagreements between students and instructors concerning grades and course-work expectations often are handled by the office, Filbeck said.

Conflicts also arise over housing, financial aid and class registration, he said. In all situations, Filbeck said, students should try to resolve conflicts themselves first.

Students should remember, he said, that instructors and administrators are accessible and approachable without help from the ombudsman's office. In fact, one way the ombudsman can help is by preparing students to negotiate better for themselves, Filbeck said.

If a department has an effective grade appeal process, the ombudsman will help students prepare their cases. However, if no effective appeal process exists, Filbeck said, the ombudsman will contact the department chairman. In some cases Filbeck has contacted the individual instructors to work out a compromise, he said.

Students who are unable to get into classes they need for graduation present tough problems because classrooms and laboratories cannot be stretched, Filbeck said. Frankly, he said, the office often is stymied.

For students who need a closed class for graduation, the ombudsman tries to help students find substitute classes or work out acceptable programs to postpone the closed class until another semester. The office looks for any reasonable alternative, he said.

Filbeck said 500 to 600 people came to the office for help last year. This is about 100 fewer than in previous years, he said.

Filbeck attributes part of this decrease to the faculty and administration's increasing awareness of students' rights and taking steps to protect those rights.

Filbeck cited a recent case where a student came to his office after being refused admission to a particular program. The program administrators had informed the student of his right to take the matter to the ombudsman.

Another reason for the decline in cases, Filbeck said, is that more instructors are spelling out what is expected of their students and becoming more adept at following their course outlines. If instructors clearly outline

what's expected of students, the grading criteria, their grading process and alternative ways students can achieve grades, there is little room for problems to arise, Filbeck said.

An instructor occasionally will outline everything and then change mid-stream. This usually generates complaints, he said.

The concept of the ombudsman office started in Sweden, Filbeck said. A king realized that the government had grown so that citizens with legitimate concerns could not get government action.

The king gave the ombudsman the authority to go around the bureaucracy at any level, even if it meant taking a problem directly to the king, Filbeck said. The university ombudsman office works much the same way, he said.

The UNL ombudsman has the authority to go directly to the level in the bureaucracy where decisions are made. That sometimes means taking a prob-

lem to the chancellor, he said.

But problems seldom go to the chancellor, Filbeck said, adding that most deans and directors are responsive.

"There are days when I'm downright proud" of the way they solve problems, Filbeck said.

If the ombudsman suspects that an instructor or professor has not acted in a professional manner, the ombudsman might take the matter to the Professional Conduct Committee. The committee holds hearings and recommends censure or suggests that the university take other action, said Filbeck, who has been ombudsman for one year and four months.

Taking a matter to the committee, however, is an extreme measure and Filbeck said he has not used it.

Avenues exist to approach any university conflict, Filbeck said. The ombudsman can help students, staff and faculty find these avenues.

Attorney expects large increase in student-related court cases

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Occasionally, Stall refers cases to other lawyers. Civil litigation cases are referred to other attorneys because they are "fee generating," she said. A student sues for some amount of money and a lawyer works for a percentage of it.

The service's second function concentrates on legal education for the university community. The handbook is just one way to do this, Stall said.

She answered students' questions in a column last year in the Daily Nebraskan. Stall said she wrote the column "to give students basic information on legal problems, let them know Student Legal Services is there and help is available to them."

But Stall said she expects a big

increase in student contacts and cases.

"We had a definite increase and I think we should have," she said. "I think we were more visible last year. We had an extra attorney working part time."

Stall said she and Bancroft can handle the workload. She said the office could offer more services if more attorney hours were available.

"I think, based on the budget we have to work with, we offer a lot of services," Stall said.

Because Stall and Bancroft work to capacity, they have no new plans for this school year.

"I think we started so much in the last couple of years that we're just going to try to smooth it out," she said. "I learned a lot from running through the program last year."

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