Executive Summary: Report of the University Ombudsperson
To the President (May 14, 2012 - May 12, 2013)

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Utilization Data

Annual Contacts: During the 2012-13 year, the Ombudsperson’s office logged 1,261 contacts. This represents a slight (7%) increase over the total number of contacts in the previous year. The contacts were about half women (52%) and were mostly domestic students (80%).

Characteristics of the problems brought to the Ombudsperson. As is typical, 82% of the contacts involved academic issues. Most of these problems came out of the classroom and the instructional process. However, we also helped resolve problems involving students’ academic status, registration issues; academic requirements; and advice and guidance about the grievance hearing system.

Looking more closely at the 605 contacts classified as “Instruction,” grade disputes and accusations of academic dishonesty were the most frequent motivations to contact the Ombudsperson. This year we had 193 contacts involving academic dishonesty, including plagiarism, cheating on exams and assignments, and forging records/documents. This represents an increase from last year of 29%. Academic misconduct continues to be a serious problem that needs to be addressed in a systematic way. (See Recommendations section.)

Other academic complaints involved conflicts over exams and student attendance; problems with the course content or syllabus; and conflicts with TAs, instructors, or advisors.

Non-academic problems accounted for 18% of our contacts and involved problems with financial aid, requests for tuition refunds, accusations of harassment and discrimination, and a variety of mental and physical health problems that were affecting the student’s performance. Although these problems are not as frequent as the academic kind, they often take more time and involve more people to resolve. They tend to be more complex and require the cooperation of several university sectors (e.g., risk evaluation, DPPS, the Office of Inclusion and Intercultural Initiatives, etc.)

Characteristics of the people who contact the Ombudsperson. Members from every sector of the university community contact our office for help and advice. Of course, students are the most frequent group to use our services. Sixty-five percent of our contacts (n=823) came from students this past year. As is typically the case, seniors lead the pack.

We serve a diverse group of students and faculty, reflecting the diversity on campus. Fifty-six percent of our contacts were Caucasian, 13% African-American, and 18% Asian Pacific Islanders.
In addition to students, we are contacted by faculty, parents, alumni, and a variety of anonymous or unidentified callers. Of the non-student contacts, nearly half (47%) come from faculty. These are always welcomed calls since we can often provide information and advice that guides the faculty in helpful ways to avoid problems with students. Parents represented 11% of last year’s non-student contacts. Those calls can be difficult since parents often call when emotions have boiled over and they are very angry or frustrated with the university. Although parents are always trying to help their sons and daughters, they sometimes struggle with their child’s growing independence and resist suggestions that we allow the student to take appropriate responsibility for solving their problems.

**Distribution of Problems by College.** As in year’s past, problems generated by each college are roughly proportional to the size of the college. Most of our contacts come from the colleges with the most students.

**Web Page Utilization:** This year we continued to make additions and improvements to our web page. We have tried to anticipate and prevent problems that might develop as the university adopts new technology, changes policies, and experiments with new teaching modalities. For example, we have added a section to our syllabus suggestions to help faculty explain their use of “TurnItIn” (plagiarism detection) software. We have also added a section of suggested language that faculty can use to explain their responsibilities under the new reporting protocols for child abuse.

The Ombudsperson’s web page continues to be a very important reference spot for the University community. It has developed a reputation as the source for accurate, useful information on many of the sticky issues faced by students and faculty. This usefulness is reflected in the increase of usage over the past few years. This year, our site received 43,449 hits up from 35,214 in 2011/2012. This is nearly a 24% increase between these two years. The number of hits has been growing as it was only 30,670 in 2010/2011. This signifies a cultural
shift in how this current generation of college students is seeking out information as it pertains to academic policies and procedures.

**Comments on Utilization Data.** Perhaps the most meaningful thing to point out in these data is the remarkable consistency they show from year to year. The data from this past year are essentially in line with the data from the last several years: academic concerns dominate the problems we field; academic dishonesty remains a serious and growing problem; the likelihood an undergraduate student will contact us grows over their time here; colleges generate contact roughly proportional to their enrollments; and faculty continue to use the services we provide. These are statements that describe this year’s data, but also describe the last decade in our office. Year in and year out, the number of actual visitors to our office remains fairly steady while the traffic on our web site increases.

**Recommendations**

**Academic Integrity.** Academic Misconduct remains one of the top issues for which visitors seek help from the Office of the Ombudsperson. Following up on recommendations we made in last year’s report, we have taken some first steps toward emphasizing prevention of Academic Misconduct over surveillance and punishment.

**Progress made:**

- The Academic Integrity Consortium (AIC), originally developed by Professor April Cognato (Zoology) and Linda Trevarthen (Manager of the Testing Office) has been active in the past year. The Consortium has passed to new leadership and has been working to formalize the group by creating bylaws and a strategic plan; they have engaged students in the work of the Consortium by creating an Academic Integrity Student Organization. They have also formed several workgroups to address different aspects of the academic integrity landscape.

**Next steps:**

- We can make more widespread use of the online Academic Integrity course that Associate Provost Estry requires as part of a convicted cheater’s rehabilitation. Last year I suggested that we develop variants of the course that are shorter and less costly; variants that can be used for prevention rather than treatment. I have spoken to Associate Provost Estry about this and he is supportive of the idea. Indeed, he has already begun to work on this issue. I hope this becomes a higher priority with the addition of an Associate Dean for Academic Integrity to his office.

- Under the auspices of the Academic Integrity Consortium, I suggest a “Best Practices to Support Academic Integrity” resource be developed and disseminated to all faculty and students. This will raise the University community’s awareness of efforts to promote academic integrity and prevent academic misconduct. Shannon Lynn Burton and I have met with the new Director of the Testing Center and he will collaborate with members of the AIC to help develop this resource.
The working group convened by Doug Estry made recommendations to the Provost about short-term goals to further the development of a culture of academic integrity at MSU. One of the suggestions was the development of a web page resource site for information about academic integrity and the consequences of academic misconduct. The Ombudsperson’s office supports the development of such a resource and will contribute to the content of this page as it gets developed.

**Academic Judicial Structure Redesign.** In last year’s report, I made several suggestions for dealing with the significant problems inherent in the current system for adjudicating student academic grievance hearings. The situation has not changed. It is clear that the academic judiciary system is in dire need of overhaul. It is inefficient and cumbersome to the point that undergraduate students are not being served by the system. They are not getting the timely justice they are entitled to and as William Gladstone observed many years ago, “justice delayed, is justice denied.”

What is wrong with the current system?
- It is difficult to maintain current hearing procedures consistent with the AFR.
- It is nearly impossible to constitute hearing panels in a timely way – especially in the summer – making it difficult to hold timely hearings.
- Hearing board members lack adequate training.
- There is inadequate oversight and management of the academic judiciary system.
- Students do not understand their rights due to the unnecessary complexity of the current system.

This analysis makes the case that the AFR must be revised. I have shared a high-level proposal for revision of the AFR Articles that structure the academic judicial system with many faculty, students, and administrators and it has been well received.

**Progress made:**
- Working collaboratively with Doug Estry, Karen Klomparens, Kristine Zayko, Denise Maybank, Rick Shafer and others, I have drafted two revised Articles (6 & 7) for the AFR. Rick Shafer has drafted revised Articles 4 & 5 and the President of ASMSU has offered suggestions for revisions in the earlier Articles.
- I presented the general form of the revisions to the Undergraduate Assistant and Associate Deans group and they were supportive of the changes being considered.
- I have introduced a draft of the revisions to the University Committee on Student Affairs this past winter.

**Next steps:**
- Continue to work through the UCSA to revise the AFR.
- Consult with Associate Provost Estry to develop training materials for hearing board members to increase the quality of the hearing procedures.