

# **Academic Ombud Services**

## **Annual report for Academic Year 1999-2000**

### **I. Introduction**

Grateful thanks are given, as always, to the Assistant to the Ombud Michelle Sohner, whose expertise, judgement, and intuition ensured that all visitors received the most effective help that could be offered. It should be emphasized that nearly all visitors or callers make their first contact with our office through Ms. Sohner, and the majority of cases are handled solely by her. In those cases requiring intervention of the Ombud, the Assistant to the Ombud has already spoken with the individual(s) and has identified the issues and possible remedies. This effective counseling by Ms. Sohner always helps streamline and focus the meeting between the visitor and the Academic Ombud

Special acknowledgement is given to Joe Anthony, Academic Ombud at Lexington Community College (LCC), with whom we look forward to a great working relationship over the next academic year. One aspect of the changed relationship between the University of Kentucky and LCC is the amalgamation of the ombud offices in both institutions, with both offices operating under the umbrella of Academic Ombud Services beginning in the 2000-2001 academic year. In preparation for this change, we and Professor Anthony have met numerous times and have had productive conversations regarding institutional rules and policies of our respective institutions. We have jointly identified areas where similarities of academic policies and procedures exist; we predict that this transition will occur seamlessly. We have also identified areas of differences and have begun to plan future meetings to discuss these differences.

As before, we extend warm thanks to the members of the academic community who consistently cooperate in our mutual efforts to be fair to all members of our academic community. When it comes to education, faculty at the University of Kentucky show a clear commitment and dedication as evidenced by their flexibility, their willingness to accept responsibility for being fair, and their personal sacrifice of time and effort.

### **II. Compliance with mission statements**

One mission of the University is "undergraduate, graduate, postgraduate, professional, and lifelong education informed by scholarship and research, and guided by a spirit of integrity and mutual respect," with values that embrace "academic excellence and freedom (and) personal integrity." From our contacts with students, faculty, and staff from every area of University life, it is our observation that the University is fulfilling its stated mission.

Academic Ombud Services strives to help the University meet its goals to make the University community "an academic community dedicated to the success of all its members and the achievement of its collective purposes." For every visitor, we try to ensure that open communication has occurred at all levels and at all times, that visitors are treated with dignity, that visitors are fully informed of their rights as a member of the academic community and the extent to which those rights will be preserved and, when necessary, defended. From our internal review in preparation for this annual report, we feel that Academic Ombud Services operates in a manner consistent with this goal and acts to help the University community achieve the goal.

### III. Activity for the Academic Year

Several differences in case distribution were noted this past year, and while it would be premature to conclude that these differences represent ongoing trends, they will be considered when the data from the 2000-2001 academic year are reviewed.

When a member of the academic community contacts our office, the problem can often be discussed by telephone with no need for further intervention. A call of this type may be a student asking what preliminary steps to follow if an incorrect grade was given, or it may be an instructor asking for clarification of a Senate Rule, for example, absence policies. Some types of problems necessitate further action and/or a face-to-face appointment. Once this level of intervention is reached, the contact becomes a "case". In the 1999-2000 academic year, there were 3% fewer single contacts but a 4% greater number of cases. This difference may simply represent a transient fluctuation. Alternatively, it could indicate that students are finding it easier to have simpler questions answered elsewhere but when they seek help from Academic Ombud Services the problems are more likely to be ones that require intervention.

Academic Ombud Services has had an increasing number of visits from non-traditional students. This might be easily related to an increasing number of non-traditional students enrolling for classes at the University. It is also possible that this group of students may be more assertive or aggressive in seeking help for a problem related to academic activity. It remains to be seen whether or not there is any pattern to the type of issues raised by non-traditional students compared to other students.

Finally, it is clear that there is an increasing number of reports by students of academic offenses they have witnessed or of which they became aware. In prior years, reports of academic offenses were initiated almost exclusively by faculty and teaching assistants. It appears that students are becoming more willing to come forward to report these events, and we have made every effort to both reassure these students that their anonymity (if requested) will be maintained and that they are making the right choice to uphold academic integrity. We will continue to follow this apparent trend over the next several years to better understand what may be causing this dramatic change in student sentiment.

### IV. Statistical Report

Number of Single Contacts (Telephone calls/Referrals).....	1,368
Number of Cases Handled .....	281

#### NATURE OF COMPLAINTS

Academic Offenses .....	25
Attendance .....	18
Discrimination .....	2
Exams .....	11
Grades .....	97
Instruction .....	59
Personal Problems .....	11
Progress/Promotion .....	51
University Policy .....	7
Total	281

## COLLEGE WHERE COMPLAINT ORIGINATED

Agriculture .....	6
Allied Health .....	6
Architecture .....	8
Arts and Sciences .....	138
Business and Economics .....	25
Communications .....	15
Dentistry .....	2
Education .....	13
Experiential Education .....	0
Engineering .....	12
Fine Arts .....	15
Human Environmental Sciences .....	10
Independent Study .....	2
Law .....	4
Martin School .....	0
Medicine .....	0
Nursing .....	4
Pharmacy .....	2
Social Work .....	9
Non-Applicable .....	10
Total	281

## STUDENT'S COLLEGE

Agriculture .....	8
Allied Health .....	8
Architecture .....	9
Arts and Sciences .....	96
Business and Economics .....	27
Communications .....	13
Dentistry .....	2
Education .....	22
Engineering .....	15
Fine Arts .....	12
Human Environmental Sciences .....	11
Law .....	4
Martin School .....	1
Medicine .....	0
Nursing .....	4
Pharmacy .....	2
Social Work .....	9
Undeclared .....	25
Non-Applicable .....	13
Total	281

## CLASSIFICATION OF THE STUDENT

First Year .....	31
Sophomore .....	55
Junior .....	62
Senior .....	81
Graduate .....	30
Professional Colleges .....	7
Non-degree .....	6
Non-applicable .....	9
Total	281

## CASES BY MONTH

July .....	24
August .....	20
September .....	15
October .....	25
November .....	20
December .....	30
January .....	29
February .....	19
March .....	22
April .....	30
May .....	32
June .....	15
Total	281

## FIVE YEAR COMPARISONS

	Cases Handled	Single Contacts
1999-00	281	1,368
1998-99	270	1,413
1997-98	275	1,402
1996-97	269	1,489
1995-96	266	1,523

## MOST FREQUENT COMPLAINTS

<u>1999-00</u>		<u>1998/99</u>	
Grades .....	97	Grades .....	101
Instruction .....	59	Progress/Promotion ....	70
Progress/Promotion .....	51	Instruction .....	40
Academic Offenses .....	25	Academic Offenses ....	22
<u>1997-98</u>		<u>1996-97</u>	
Grades .....	110	Grades .....	92
Progress/Promotion .....	73	Progress/Promotion .....	68
Instruction .....	37	Instruction .....	44
Academic Offenses .....	18	Academic Offenses .....	21
<u>1995-96</u>			
Grades .....	111		
Progress/Promotion .....	58		
Instruction .....	31		
Academic Offenses .....	22		

### IV. Academic offenses

The number of academic offenses increased slightly from the year before. As mentioned in the introduction, a significant finding was an increase in the number of cheating cases reported by students. This could signify student dissatisfaction with the current environment regarding academic integrity, and the willingness to alert faculty about breaches of integrity.

When students were accused of cheating or plagiarism, the majority of cases (67%) were not questioned or appealed and the sanction was imposed. In other words, the students knew and understood that the accusations were appropriate and/or any defense would be a weak one. In the remaining cases, students made initial inquiries to Academic Ombud Services about the mechanisms and strengths/weaknesses of an appeal. In 9% of cases, the students withdrew their intended appeal after discussion with the Ombud.

The remaining 26% of cases went to the Appeals Board, and roughly 2 out of 3 appeals were denied. This is significant for several reasons: first, it underscores the notion that faculty who come forward with accusations of cheating or plagiarism do so only after much deliberation and investigation. A student is innocent until proven guilty, and in the majority of cases the Appeals Board has found that the preponderance of evidence did indeed indicate guilt, thus reaffirming the faculty allegation. It has been our experience that going through a cheating accusation can be emotionally painful, and that includes the faculty making the accusation. Therefore, it is our conclusion that faculty do not take this role lightly, and tend to bring forward only those cases that have the greatest probability for the sanction to be upheld either by not being appealed at all or by having the Appeals Board deny the student's appeal.

Another conclusion to be drawn is that these statistics should dispel any perceptions by the faculty that it is not worthwhile to pursue a cheating case since "it would get overturned by

the Appeals Board anyway." Our data show this to be untrue, considering that the majority of cases were never even appealed, and of the cases that were appealed most were denied.

## **V. The Appeals Process**

In our opinion, the appeals process and the Appeals Board appear to have been consistently fair and have acted within the spirit and the letter of the Senate Rules. The hearings were held in a timely manner and notices to students, faculty and Appeals Board members were sent out promptly. After a decision was reached, appropriate administrators, students and faculty were notified promptly as well.

The chair of the Appeals Board, Dr. Joseph Fink, has always made every effort to assemble a quorum and now with the six additional members appointed from LCC the pool of members has been increased to 24 so that task will hopefully be somewhat easier.