

The Evolution of the Role of Ombudsperson on University and College Campuses

by Tim Griffin

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In exploring the practice of conflict management on college and university campuses, the role of ombuds person is a factor that is sometimes overlooked. To appreciate the contribution to campus conflict management that ombuds persons can and do make, it is worth exploring the ways in which the nature of this position has evolved over the past several decades.

A review of the literature reveals three general trends in the evolution of the college and university ombuds role. This evolution has been evidenced in a variety of ways on different campuses due to the unique needs and environments of each institution of higher education providing such a service. First, there has been a shift from ombuds persons fulfilling a primarily reactive role to their also undertaking a proactive one. Second, ombuds persons now deal increasingly with the issues and concerns of individuals instead of focusing mostly on matters relating to identifiable campus groups. Third, as the role of ombuds person has evolved, the clientele served has expanded.

The first college and university ombuds offices in the United States were established in 1966 (Packwood, 1977) or 1977 (Stieber, 1991). By 1973, there existed some two hundred ombuds persons at institutions of higher education (Drew, 1973), about the same number that served in that role in 1994. The creation of ombuds

offices coincided with the on set of student demonstrations protesting national policies relating to civil rights and to the conflict in Vietnam. It has also been suggested that the growing unrest was further attributable to the sense of disenfranchisement felt by students attending institutions of higher education whose bureaucratic structures and student numbers had expanded in an unprecedented manner during the previous decade.

Many institutions during this time initiated ombuds offices specifically in response to these protests (Eddy, 1968; Munding, 1967; White, 1969). Ombuds persons were required to mediate between groups of demonstrators and the college/ university administration. Other campuses, fearing that they too would be hit by demonstrations, instituted ombuds offices in an attempt to head them off. At such institutions the ombudsperson was charged with bringing students' concerns to the appropriate campus administrators so that an institutional response could be devised and group demonstrations forestalled (Barzun, 1968). Over time, even those campuses that established ombuds offices in response to existing, overt conflict, began to recognize that the ombudsperson could also serve in a more preventative mode (Rowland, 1969).

Ombuds persons began identifying potentially problematic or inequitable institutional policies and procedures prior to the initiation of actual complaints. This function, described by Packwood (1977) as an "initiator role," has more recently evolved into an even more proactive function - the involvement of the ombudsperson as a consultant/advisor in the development of policies and procedures (Kerze, 1994).

This practice represents the pinnacle of ombuds proactivity, for it reduces the chance that codified bureaucratic behavior will result in (real or perceived) inequities which could subsequently require a

reactive ombuds response. While even the best conceived institutional policies and procedures maybe unable to address the specific circumstances of all individuals in an equitable manner, participatory and thoughtful policy development processes involving active input from the ombudsperson can reduce the number of conflicts.

The second significant change in the ombuds person's role has been the shift away from a focus on student groups toward working with issues surfaced by individuals. Such issues not only involve conflict between an individual and the institution but also conflicts and problems that have arisen between individuals on a campus. In response to these situations, ombuds persons can offer a range of options for action, from the formal to the informal. Among the strategies identified as appropriate for less formal resolution is mediation. Although ombuds persons have used mediation since the inception of the ombuds role, the difference today is that a) mediation most commonly takes place between individuals rather than between the institution and student groups, and b) ombuds persons today can often work with and through campus mediation centers and do not necessarily have to play the mediator role themselves. The relationship between the ombuds role and ADR is fascinating one. Articles exploring this link began to proliferate in the 1980s (Lupton, 1984) and continue in relatively large numbers to the present day (Anderson, 1993; Persico,1991; Guera and Flinchbaugh,1993; Rifkin and Rowe,1991).

The third significant change in the role of ombuds person since its inception has been its expansion towards serving a far broader clientele. Originally, students represented the primary, if not the exclusive constituency of ombuds persons. As awareness grew to the value of having a knowledgeable, objective person available to the campus, other members of the campus community began to

avail themselves of this resource. During the 1970s and 1980s ombuds persons also began to serve faculty and staff. Today, many ombuds persons provide services to alumni, parents, area residents, and contractors performing services on their campus.

In order for ombuds persons to continue to be effective - particularly given their even broadening clientele base - it is essential that they be viewed as objective. An ombudsperson who is seen as an advocate for one party may not be able to mediate effectively since (the perception of) neutrality is generally regarded as essential to the mediation process. Many campuses, and individual ombuds persons, have struggled with issue of balancing the need for advocacy with the need for a designated neutral on campus. This is an issue still very much debated (Sebok,1994; Wallace,1993).

The role of ombudsperson in institutions of higher education is multifaceted (Vice,1994a,1994b) and one that has involved in a number of ways over the past thirty years. As our colleagues and universities continue to change, there can be little doubt that this evolution will continue.

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