

REFLECTIONS:

SEVENTEEN YEARS AS MSU OMBUDSMAN



Photo by Bruce Fox

Carolyn Stieber at her desk in Linton Hall.

MSU'S OMBUDSMAN RECOUNTS HER EFFORTS TO HELP THOUSANDS OF STUDENTS SURVIVE THE RED TAPE AND OTHER INSTITUTIONAL PITFALLS ON CAMPUS.

By Carolyn Stieber

Everyone

in the department agrees that a student's failing grade resulted from an arithmetic error by the professor, who happens to be on a sabbatical leave overseas. What recourse does the student have?

A student's horse has died at a local stable where it was boarded and the student and stable owner dispute the dead animal's value. How can this conflict be resolved?

The stipend from a country in political turmoil has not arrived for an international student, whose rent and tuition are due. What can the student do?

One thing these students can do—and did—is to come and see me. So have several thousands of others. They have brought the whole gamut of problems one would expect at a large institution—problems such as the red tape in financial aids, disputes about grades or other conflicts with professors, and accusations of cheating. Many problems are routine, while others present the unexpected and bizarre.

As MSU's ombudsman during the past 17 years, my job has been to help resolve student problems that involve any aspect of the university's operation, academic or non-academic. In that period, I have been contacted by some 1,000 students a year, listening to their problems in confidence, and offering advice and practical assistance wherever possible.

Some problems are unique. Once the wrong twin received the financial aid. Another time a housing contract was terminated but the signature was someone other than the room's occupant. Other problems tend to recur. Graduate students often want help to change advisers or guidance committee members. Repeatedly there are students who have conflicts in final exam schedules but neither professor is willing to offer an alternative time.

One common problem involves allegations of cheating, which MSU handles in a clearly defined set of procedures. Many faculty call my office for information on their options in penalizing such behavior while students, often indignant or worried or both, want to know their rights.

On one occasion a science major came to my office insisting he had been wrongfully accused of cheating by a professor. After some investigation, I found that the assignment had involved collecting insects. To make sure students did not turn in bugs collected by others, the professor would spray each collection. Thus, if someone turned in "used" bugs, they would "light up." This is what had

happened to this particular student's collection. I had to convey the unwelcome news that his case seemed hopeless.

MSU established the ombudsman office in 1967 as a response to campus unrest in the turbulent decade of the 1960s. Protests about the Vietnam War and free speech issues began in Berkeley, sweeping eastward and intensifying. Along with complaints about national and international issues came complaints about bureaucratic tangles at rapidly growing universities, Michigan State among them.

True to its tradition as the nation's pioneering land-grant college, MSU became a pioneer in responding to this growing student unrest. We were the first major college or university in the nation to appoint an "ombudsman," an office that has since become a model for countless others. Hardly a week goes by without an inquiry from somewhere on how we do things.

The term "ombudsman" is generally used regardless of gender (although there is some difference of opinion on this

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point). Both the word and the concept are Swedish; it refers to a public official appointed to deal with individual complaints against government acts. Sweden officially created the post in 1809, and the concept spread to many other countries. Within an institution, the term now commonly refers to the system through which one can seek to rectify administrative abuses or errors.

Incorporated into the 1967 Academic Freedom Report, a fundamental piece of campus legislation approved by the Board of Trustees, is a provision establishing the office and prescribing that it be held by a senior (tenured) faculty member. Access and independence are assured by having the ombudsman report directly to the president, to whom an annual written report is submitted detailing the statistics of the office, highlighting the problems handled each year, and identifying

"squeaky" policies or procedures that appear to disadvantage students.

The MSU ombudsman handles only matters centered on students—at all levels—who are involved with some aspect of university operations, academic or non-academic. Problems, ranging from trivial to serious, may focus on a single person, a large group, or a whole class and can take minutes or years to resolve.

In common with counterparts in and out of academe, an ombudsman does not give orders. Nonetheless, cooperation with the office on this campus is very high, aided by informality, confidentiality, and the knowledge that the office will make an independent assessment of the problem at hand. No one has ever interfered with my independence, despite long service under four very different presidents with no tenure protection residing in the position itself.

Clout rests on the ombudsman's knowledge of the university, ability to persuade, and the possibility of further support from the administrative hierarchy. No one knows for sure how hard I'll fight or how high up I'm prepared to go. Usually, when backup is needed the provost's office is consulted, given the academic nature of most complaints, but other vice presidents have been contacted when a thorny matter falls in their bailiwick. By and large, however, few high level reinforcements have been necessary.

Prior to and most years following my appointment in 1974 by former president Clifton R. Wharton, Jr., to be MSU's second ombudsman, I taught political science classes that focused on state/local politics.

Counted among my former students are Governor John Engler, whose famous "blueprint" paper was an assignment in my Michigan Politics class, and Spencer Abraham, now a national Republican Party official. Numbered among the Democrats are Tom Holcomb, who served in the Michigan legislature, and Wayne County Sheriff Robert Ficano. Ernest Green, a graduate of Central High in Little Rock, Arkansas, after the school's stormy integration, was in one of my classes, as was a Miss America, Nancy Johnson, plus several administrators currently at the university, including Gene Garrison of Automotive Services and Ferman Badgley of Public Safety.

Teaching was a wonderful mind-stretching experience for me, but being

ombudsman was the assignment for which my whole life seemed to prepare me.

Last February, convinced that the many changes due at the university in 1992 made this an appropriate time to step aside, I informed President DiBiaggio of my plan to retire this summer. I shall leave satisfied that my successor will inherit a credible office that has earned a useful place in MSU's organizational structure.

There are now well over 100 counterpart offices in colleges and universities across the U.S. and Canada, numerous enough to form a national association for which I served as president two years ago. I expect to remain active as the first ombudsman elected to the board of directors in a much larger and more diverse group, the Society of Professionals in Dispute Resolution (SPIDR). Also, I hope to continue an interest and interaction with government and other forms of ombudsmen throughout the world, many of whom I have met at conferences.

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There will be frustrations: My successor, like many other people, may have difficulty deciphering my handwritten notes. Students will continue to be disappointed when they discover that an ombudsman does not print money, change grades, or fire anyone. My serious wish is for my successor to have what I have had—a terrific experience that is sometimes exasperating but never boring, with the opportunity to assure fairness for many students who might otherwise fall between the cracks in this large and complex university.

Carolyn Stieber is retiring as MSU ombudsman and member of the political science faculty. She has served on the board of directors of the State News, which named her "Spartan of the Year" in 1987. She chaired an MSU/East Lansing task force on town/gown problems in 1984-85 and is former president of the university's Phi Beta Kappa chapter.

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