

Sunday Dec. 8, 1968

College Ombudsman — Valuable New Official

BY WILLIAM GRANT
Free Press Education Writer

A Michigan State University student recently found himself forced to make a serious choice between school and sport — he was assigned to register for the next semester on the first day of the deer-hunting season.

The student turned that problem over to Dr. James D. Rust.

Dr. Rust merely suggested to the avid hunter that he seek out his faculty adviser and try to register early.

That problem, and many which are more serious, are the everyday fare for this slender graying English professor. He is MSU's ombudsman.

The concept of ombudsman, adapted from the Swedish and Danish governmental posts of "citizens' protector," is becoming increasingly popular on America's college campuses.

Although there are probably no more than 20 or 30 campuses that now have ombudsmen, several dozen more are considering the creation of such a post.

There are two ombudsmen on Michigan campuses — Dr. Rust at MSU and Thomas F. Davis at the University of Detroit.

EARLE W. Clifford, dean of students at New Jersey's Rutgers University, has been one of the chief critics of the ombudsman concept.

He calls it a "gimmick" and argues that it is an admission universities have failed to do their jobs well.

"It's like putting a penny in the fuse box when a circuit has blown," Clifford says. Many campus officials disagree.

Davis, who is also dean of freshmen studies and director of the counseling service at U of D, says that a need has arisen on the nation's campuses "for voicing the individual student's attitudes and complaints."

The need, Davis says, has developed because "the individual student confronts an educational structure that is more and more difficult to understand."

DIFFERENT campus situations have led to the creation of an ombudsman.

The appointment of Dr. Rust by MSU President John Hannah grew out of the court case against the university by a student, Paul Schiff.

Schiff charged that in 1965 he had been denied readmission to MSU because of his political activity, and a federal court ruled that indeed Schiff had been denied due process.

"We came out of that with



Dr. James Rust



Thomas Davis

plenty of egg on our face," says Dr. Rust.

A sweeping study of academic freedom at MSU after the Schiff case resulted in a recommendation that a senior faculty member be appointed ombudsman.

In September, 1967, President Hannah turned to Dr. Rust, a respected English professor. Rust still teaches a course on the Victorian novel.

Rust could easily have played the fatherly professor in a dozen old college movies. One student leader suggests that it is Rust's warmth and kindness that have led to his rapport with students.

Whatever the reason, students — from the unmarried coed who becomes pregnant to the avid deer-hunter — have found it easy to share their problems with him.

AND ALTHOUGH a cardinal rule among ombudsmen is not to expect miracles, Dr. Rust has worked his share.

In his first week as ombudsman, he was greeted by a tearful coed who had been informed by a teller that her scholarship was missing.

She had been sent all over campus on a wild goose chase before she reached Rust's office.

After some investigation, Dr. Rust found that the coed and another girl on campus had exactly the same first, middle and last name. The other girl had asked for a scholarship, had not been informed that her request was

refused and had picked up the money which was not hers.

Rust told the university administration "there is nothing to do but find the money for another scholarship."

The university did.

IN JUST over a year in office, Rust has received the greatest number of complaints about teaching and grades. It is these complaints that lead to his chief frustration.

"One of my most frustrating experiences," he says, "is to have a student convince me that his grade was not the grade he really should have received."

In such cases, Dr. Rust finds his hands tied. "No one has more power than a professor holds over a class," he says.

"I go to the professor, the department head and the dean," Dr. Rust says, "but I have found no satisfactory solution."

UNLIKE DR. Rust, U of D's Davis will also hear complaints from faculty members.

"One guy asked me if I could get a microphone for his classroom," Davis recalls. The mike was in place the next day.

Davis was selected by U of D's student government and has held his post as ombudsman only since school opened in September.

Since that time he has heard a wide range of complaints from students who had somehow managed to become lost in the university bureaucracy.

Like Dr. Rust, Davis believes one of the chief jobs an ombudsman performs is that of a "referral service" — telling students where to go for the help they need.

Davis is young, vigorous and a popular campus figure. He was the teacher of the year in the College of Arts and Sciences in 1967.

He wants to create a situation at U of D where every dean and administrator is an ombudsman in his own right. "We all have to be willing to listen to what students have to say," he says.

But still there seems to be a need for someone like an ombudsman on many campuses. As one student candidly told Davis: "I've tried everything else on this. Now I'll see what you can do."