



Ombudsman in action—Michigan State coed who brings complaint to office of Dr. James D. Rust gets sympathetic hearing, loses feeling that she is being treated like a punch card.

O-M-B-U-D-S-M-A-N!

The New College Hero

by JACK HARRISON POLLACK

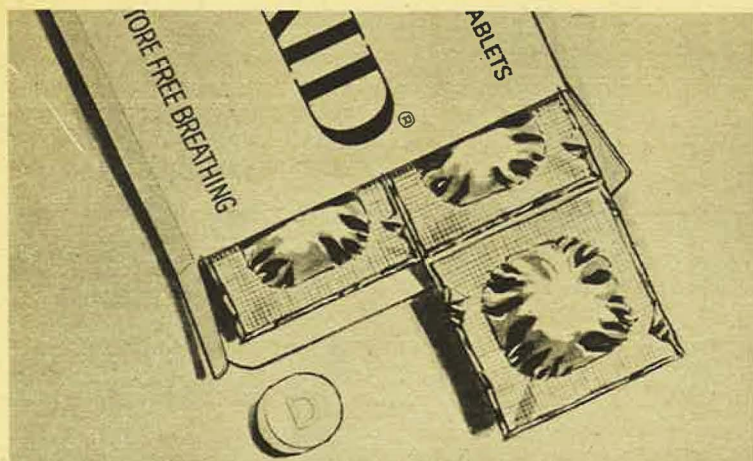
EAST LANSING, MICH.
*A*t a Western university recently, a student carried this sign: "I am a student. Do not fold, spindle or mutilate." At an Eastern campus, a coed told **PARADE**: "It's awful trying to complain to a computer or have a phone call answered by recording machine."

These are symptoms of a malaise that is afflicting the large "impersonal" universities across America. With some campuses the size of small cities, students increasingly feel they are being treated like punch cards.

One big school here—Michigan State, with an enrollment of 38,000—in an effort to meet the problem, is trying

something new in campus life. Last September it appointed an Ombudsman, borrowing an idea from the Scandinavian countries, whose Ombudsmen hear and investigate complaints against government bureaucracy.

For this job, Michigan selected a witty, likable English professor, Dr. James D. Rust. He conceives of himself as general watchdog, student protector, fixer, fighter against "city hall" and, most importantly, a non-Establishment man who serves as a direct line for the student. With broad, independent authority and quick access to university officials from the president down, he listens to gripes, cuts red tape and confidentially solves problems not handled through



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HERO continued

Dr. Rust has found it necessary to make clear to students that some things are beyond his capacity to adjust. One boy asked the Ombudsman to fix a parking ticket and was surprised when he retorted: "I can't fix my own."

Grades are something else Dr. Rust can do little about. He insists that a student must first take up a grievance with a teacher and work through the appropriate department before coming to the Ombudsman. "I may suggest to students how best to approach a teacher about assessing a grade," he acknowledges. "But I won't directly ask a colleague to change his judgment on an academic performance."

At times Dr. Rust has to crack down on students. In one instance, a boy who had erroneously received \$200 extra in a refund check refused to return it on the grounds that the university and not he had made the mistake. The Ombudsman told him: "It's unethical not to return the money, and besides, the university may hold up your degree if you don't. Isn't your degree worth \$200?" The student finally agreed that it was. Another boy came to see Dr. Rust after being flunked out because he wasn't attending classes. Investigation indicated he had registered to avoid the draft. Rust told him: "You're a phantom student and I can't in good conscience help you unless you attend classes and do your work."

When a superior student came in one day to complain that an elderly teacher was using the same notes, same script, same jokes year after year, Dr. Rust told him forthrightly: "Professor X is going to retire soon. He is being put out to pasture. Would you rather the university behaved toward him with ruthless efficiency or generosity and compassion?"

Stunned by the Ombudsman's candor, the student gulped, "I guess generosity and compassion."

Psychological impact

Beyond the practical assistance given by the Ombudsman is the psychological impact his presence has had on students—the feeling he gives that they have some recourse against unfair actions. In addition, he acts as restraining influence against possibly autocratic moves by the authorities.

Even students whom Rust has been unable to help concede that he is fair and the office of Ombudsman useful. "Gee, he actually listened to me," said one. "He's on our side," remarked another. Cartoons in the *Michigan State News*, the campus daily, depict him as a friendly sort, ready to listen to the most outlandish complaints.

Dr. Rust himself views the Ombudsman as an office that can not only help students over rough spots but get them to see themselves and their problems in better perspective.

"Much of my job is just listening and explaining," he says. "Many kids aren't aware of the resources available to them, or are timid about using them. Even



"Now then, what seems to be your problem?"

when a student has a bitter complaint, once he understands why a situation exists and how he can do something about it he is generally satisfied.

"My attitude toward the student with a tale of woe is that he is telling me the truth until I find out he is lying. I have made that melancholy discovery on several occasions, but not enough to change my basic convictions about students. Most of the complaints they bring to me are real, but some students can be rude, inconsiderate, demanding or youthfully intolerant. These late adolescents or young adults want complete freedom but still want to be protected from the exercise of that freedom. They are quick to take offense about what they regard as infringements of their rights. Some of their complaints, after investigation, turn out to be without foundation. But even though we may become impatient, censorious or even angry with them, we must still try to help these kids."

How far is the Ombudsman idea likely to spread? The Stony Brook campus of the sprawling State University of New York has three faculty members sharing his functions on a part-time basis. San Jose State College in California appointed a full-time Ombudsman last October following campus racial disturbances at the start of the semester. Dozens of other institutions, including big ones like the University of California at Berkeley, UCLA, and Wayne State University in Detroit, and smaller schools such as Valparaiso University in Indiana, are considering appointing an Ombudsman.

Says philosophy instructor John Paul Eddy, who directs a new Research Bureau for Ombudsmen at Southern Illinois University: "The Ombudsman office is one of the major breakthroughs in democracy for the common man since the days of the ancient Greeks."

Perhaps the best measure of the Ombudsman's success, however, comes right at Michigan State, where faculty members, envious of their students' new privilege, have themselves begun to apply to Professor Rust for advice. So far, at least, he has politely declined to listen to any of his colleagues' problems. He has enough as it is, he says.

traditional channels.

For some examples as to how Dr. Rust works:

A married coed, four-and-a-half months pregnant, recently told him tearfully that under a long-standing college rule she had been denied permission to re-enroll. Dr. Rust did some fast checking, found that Michigan State was planning to change its rules on pregnant students, and persuaded the authorities to let the girl continue her studies.

A student asked help in finding a job that would permit him to wear a beard. University authorities were reluctant to employ him in a capacity where his beard would be on public display. Dr. Rust managed to find him employment as a janitor.

A third case concerned a youth who believed he was entitled to a financial rebate under Michigan State's tuition discount plan, which is based on a family's gross income. The Ombudsman not only helped the boy get a discount, but managed to get him a scholarship.

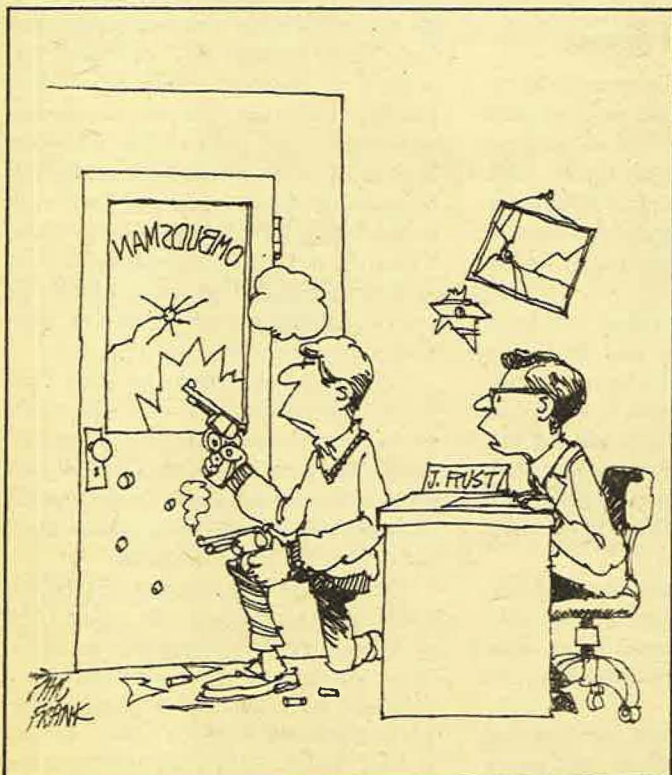
No lollipops

"I'm not a Big Daddy or an administration fink," says Dr. Rust, who is a slim, young-looking 57. "I don't give lollipops to kids and I don't close my eyes if I see any arbitrary or whimsical actions. This Ombudsman office is a university conscience."

Rust works out of a modest basement office furnished with borrowed chairs and a conference table. Students who wish to consult him are asked to fill out an appointment sheet stating their problems. They have been known to complain about everything, including the bathroom sink, as actually happened when a group of boys marched in to report that a dormitory washbasin was broken (Dr. Rust got a maintenance man there in a hurry).

Most of the squawks have to do with those two traditional college bugaboos, money and grades. Near the bottom of the list, despite the hue and cry over them, are drugs and sex, Dr. Rust says. Many of the students come to see him about job opportunities, housing complaints, curfew regulations, even about overdue library books.

continued



"Just what sort of trouble are you in with the university?"