INTRODUCTION

This year marks the 40th anniversary of an Ombuds Office on the Berkeley Campus dedicated to serving students.

The Ombuds Office for Students and Postdoctoral Appointees provides an informal dispute resolution process in which the Ombudsperson advocates for fairness, justice, respect for differences, and reasonable solutions to student and postdoctoral related matters. This Office confidentially receives complaints, concerns, or inquiries about alleged acts, omissions, improprieties, and/or broader systemic problems, and serves as an early alert mechanism for systemic change.

The Ombudsperson listens, offers options, facilitates resolutions, informally looks into situations or otherwise examines the issues independently and impartially. While the daily assistance provided to students, postdocs, and others to respond to challenges and difficult situations effectively is essential, the Ombudsperson must also actualize preventive efforts by maintaining good relationships with campus administration, faculty, and staff, and ensure broad campus understanding of the purpose and role of the Student Ombuds Office. Because the campus community constantly changes as students, staff, and faculty enter and leave each year, continuing communication efforts are necessary. Outreach and feedback to the campus are also important and ongoing key objectives so that members of the campus community are aware of and access this unique service.

One of the important benefits of having the Ombuds Office for Students and Postdoctoral Appointees is that it sends the message that this institution cares about its students and its people and recognizes the value of providing an informal dispute resolution resource. Those who use this Office are empowered to decide for themselves how they will address their concerns and are coached in conflict resolution skill–building techniques and the language of non-defensive communication.

When the intervention of the Ombudsperson results in student retention, it is usually a “win-win” outcome for the institution and the parties involved. When the intervention of the Ombudsperson results in the avoidance of litigation and formal grievances, financial savings and the administrative time saved can be considerable, and negative campus publicity is avoided. When the intervention helps to create an environment in which we can all work together, it supports the campus’ goal of equity and inclusion.

The Division of Student Affairs and the Graduate Division began the process of strengthening and expanding the Ombuds Office for Students and Postdoctoral Appointees following the retirement in 2005 of the campus’ first Student Ombudsperson. The grand momentum and important accomplishments that have been put in place for this Office since that time must continue.
HISTORY OF THE STUDENT OMBUDS OFFICE ON CAMPUS

Former Student Ombudsperson Kathleen Dickson shared with us her memories of the history and development of the Ombuds Office for Students and Postdoctoral Appointees. According to Ms. Dickson, Professor George Leitmann served as the very first Ombudsman at the University of California, Berkeley and, according to his website, in the entire UC system, beginning in 1968. Professor Leitmann started the office because he was a "natural" Ombudsman. Students came to him informally because of his reputation for helping students. He was so respected by his colleagues that they were also happy to have his assistance in addressing student concerns.

Ms. Dickson recalled that during that time it was the era of student demonstrations against the Vietnam War. Professor Leitmann was also responsible for the establishment of the campus Observer Program. He started that program informally by showing up in the area where the police were booking student demonstrators. He wore his most professorial attire and found that his presence, just standing there, made everyone behave better. Other faculty heard what he was doing and began joining him. This was the beginning of what became a formal program that continues to this day which provides a valuable service to the campus and its students.

In 1969, the Academic Senate passed By-Law 22 making the Ombudsman function official by establishing the Office of the Academic Ombudsman as a committee of the Berkeley Division of the Academic Senate. The Academic Senate Committee on Committees had the responsibility of selecting faculty to serve in this capacity. In August 1987, Kathleen Dickson was hired to serve as the office support person for the Office of the Academic Ombudsman. On March 31, 1992, the Berkeley Division of the Academic Senate voted to revise By-Law 22 to keep the function of dealing with complaints from academic personnel with the Academic Senate Ombudsman, but to relocate the student complaints to the Office of Student Affairs by creating the Office of the Ombudsman for Students. Since 1999 the Office has had a dual reporting line to both the Vice Chancellor for Student Affairs and the Dean of the Graduate Division.

Ms. Dickson stated that the success of the Ombudsman function owes a huge debt of gratitude to the faculty who from 1968 to 1992 served as the Academic Senate Ombudsman. Their integrity and dedication created a reputation that made it possible for her to carry on the service after she became the Ombudsman for Students in 1992. The faculty had created relationships throughout the campus, at all levels of the administration, so that addressing a student’s concern received immediate response.

Ms. Dickson reported that the most gratifying part of being the Ombudsman for Students and Postdoctoral Appointees was the opportunity to be of service to the amazing students, faculty, and staff that are the heart of the University of California, Berkeley. She commented that since confidentiality always prevented her from discussing individual cases, her sense of value and appreciation during her eighteen years of ombudsing work came from the appreciation and praise expressed by those individuals with whom she came in contact and whom she assisted with thousands of issues. She remembered that not all situations resulted in the outcome students initially sought, but everyone was clear that every possible avenue for resolution had been pursued. Many visitors expressed gratitude and respect for the office and its role on campus. Many also indicated that they appreciated learning conflict resolution skills; they gained a sense of empowerment and felt better prepared to deal with future difficulties after having worked with the Student Ombuds.
2006-2008 SIGNIFICANT ACCOMPLISHMENTS AND ACTIVITIES

1. In October 2007, the first Ombuds Office assistant (50% SAOII) was hired, expanding the office to 1.5 FTE to assist about 35,000 students and postdocs, as well as faculty and staff who work with these groups.

2. As a result of the above accomplishment, the creation and development of the database system for collecting data to provide detailed feedback to the campus about trends, campus climate, and other operational issues could be achieved. The development of an evaluation tool has also been accomplished allowing us to survey student visitors about our service, and to obtain invaluable information to aid in addressing student and campus needs.

3. In the spring of 2007, the very first official website for the Ombuds Office for Students and Postdoctoral Appointees was created. Students and other campus members and the public are now able to find out more about the Ombuds Office and review information about its functions and role.

http://students.berkeley.edu/Ombuds/

4. We have also created the very first Student Ombuds Office brochure and bookmark to support and enhance outreach efforts. These materials are available at different locations across the campus, including: Campus Life and Leadership, Admissions, the Student Advocate’s Office, Graduate Assembly, Title IX Compliance Office, and the Cesar Chavez Center to name a few.

5. Additionally, as part of our annual outreach efforts geared towards informing the campus community about the role and services of the Student Ombuds Office, the Director and Ombudsperson met with and gave presentations to several units and organizations. The list includes the ASUC Executive Leadership Training, Student Advocates Orientation Program, Graduate Assembly, L&S Advisors, Graduate and Undergraduate Advisors, Summer Session Advisors Annual Meeting, and the GSI Training and Orientation Program.
VISITORS TO THE STUDENT OMBUDS OFFICE

We began keeping anonymous records about visitors and issues brought to the office in December 2005. The goal is to be able to provide valuable feedback to the campus community about trends and concerns to help our students have a successful educational experience. Between Dec. 1, 2005 and April 30, 2008, 248 people contacted the Student Ombuds Office for assistance. While the majority of these individuals were students, we also assisted postdocs, faculty, staff, parents, alumni, and other members of the community such as University Extension students.

Of the total student visitors, 60% were undergraduate students and 40% were graduate students even though undergraduates make up about 70% of the total UC Berkeley student population, and graduate students represent 30%.
WHAT ISSUES ARE MOST COMMON?

The data shows the following breakdown when looking only at student visitors:

**Common Issues**

- Treatment General: 20%
- Grades: 17%
- Policies Not Clear: 14%
- Treatment By Advisor (Grad only): 7%
- Disability: 6%
- Enrollment: 6%

**Grad Student Common Issues**

- Treatment By Advisor: 21%
- Treatment General: 20%
- Policies Not Clear: 13%
- Compensation: 7%
- Disability: 7%
- Dismissal: 7%
- Grades: 7%

**Undergrad Student Common Issues**

- Grades: 28%
- Treatment General: 23%
- Policies Not Clear: 14%
- Enrollment: 9%
- Disability: 7%
- Policies Not Followed: 6%
ISSUES AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Treatment and Civility - The most common issue (20% of total visitors) brought to the Student Ombuds Office concerned treatment and civility. These issues included perceived disrespect of students by instructors, of students by other students, hostile environment in lab groups, a lack of compassion, empathy and willingness to listen, a need to be heard and understood, and accommodations. It is important to note that 7% of the total visitors, representing 21% of graduate student visitors, also expressed concerns about disrespectful treatment received from their dissertation advisors.

Recommendation - Include the campus’ “Principles of Community” in orientation programs and materials. Routinely distribute this document via email and web-links to inform faculty, staff, and students of behavioral expectations that support an environment free from all forms of harassment, intimidation, and conduct that create a hostile campus environment. Encourage dissertation advisors to be clear and specific about their expectations and guidelines to foster graduate students’ success in completing their doctoral programs. Practice proactive and positive communication that allows us to hold each other accountable for maintaining these principles.

Grades - Disagreements concerning grades were the second most common issue expressed by students to the Ombuds, particularly undergraduate students. Students often believed that they performed much better in class than the grades they received indicated.

Recommendation - Instructors must ensure that students receive clear and sufficiently detailed information at the beginning of each class about how students’ performance in class will be measured. It is very important to distribute a course syllabus, which includes expectations and standards for grading. Instructors should also be available and open to explaining to students what criteria were used to determine the grades students ultimately received.

Unclear Policies and Procedures - Students need help navigating through the administrative bureaucracy. They come to the Ombuds Office for assistance with understanding various campus policies and procedures. Inquiries about how the system works involved final exam schedules and disability accommodations, religious accommodations, compensation, students seeking clarification about job duties and responsibilities, removal of registration blocks, intellectual property rights, campus noise policy, and the procedures for addressing interpersonal conflicts.

Recommendation – Place as much information as practical and appropriate on a website. Identify who or what office in the department can help students with policy interpretations and procedures. Create a welcoming environment so that students are not afraid to ask questions to get the help they need.
SURVEY RESULTS

In order to receive feedback from the campus community about the effectiveness of our services, the Ombuds Office developed a one-page survey (attached). Participation in the survey is voluntary and completely anonymous. 22 people received in-office assistance during the spring semester survey period (February 1 – April 15) and all agreed to participate in the survey. 11 responses were received, a 50% completion rate.

The results show that other members of the campus community referred the majority of visitors to the office, and we value those recommendations. Most students came looking for informal conflict resolution assistance and needed help to sort through their options. Some were also looking for advocacy support, which is not the role of an Ombuds. We must continue to clarify our neutral and independent roles. One student who had considered filing a formal grievance informed us that he changed plans after working with our office!

We are delighted to report that all of the comments were very positive. Here are several examples of student feedback about their experiences with the Ombuds Office:

“Very professional staff, excellent guidance through a difficult (ongoing) period. The Ombuds’ Office provides a very important service, for which I am grateful.”

“Carmen did a great job of outlining the process for me and it felt like she really cared about my dispute. Thanks!”

“This was my salvation.”

“The service was exceptional. Carmen is wonderful and skillful.”

“Ombuds Office personnel were very helpful in discussing the reasons and developing useful approaches to my problem with my advisor. By asking the right questions to me, they were able to identify my strong sides and how to express those to my advisor.”

“Very helpful, directive, and inspiring.”

“Great service to graduate students!”
We appreciate your feedback regarding the services offered by our office.

1. How did you find out about our office?
   - Website
   - Departmental recommendation
   - Word-of-mouth
   - Brochure
   - Not my first visit
   - Other

2. Briefly describe the issue(s) that you wished to discuss with the Ombuds Office. For example: grade dispute, communication with faculty sponsor, etc.

3. Briefly describe the type of assistance that you expected to receive from the Ombuds Office. For example: an advocate, review of options, informal conflict resolution, etc.

4. Do you feel your options were adequately discussed during your visit(s)?
   - Yes
   - No

5. Were you clear about your next steps after your meeting(s) with the Ombudsperson?
   - Yes
   - No

6. Had you planned to file a formal complaint before you came to the Ombuds Office?
   - Yes
   - No
   - If you chose an informal process instead, why?

7. If you were referred to other campus resources for additional assistance, was the referral useful?
   - N/A
   - Yes
   - No (please explain)

8. Would you contact the Ombuds Office again for assistance with a campus issue?
   - Yes
   - No

9. Please circle one. Student: Undergraduate, MA/MS, PhD  Post-Doc  Faculty  Staff

Please add your comments:

______________________________________________________________
These principles of community for the University of California, Berkeley, are rooted in our mission of teaching, research and public service. They reflect our passion for critical inquiry, debate, discovery and innovation, and our deep commitment to contributing to a better world. Every member of the UC Berkeley community has a role in sustaining a safe, caring and humane environment in which these values can thrive.

- We place honesty and integrity in our teaching, learning, research and administration at the highest level.
- We recognize the intrinsic relationship between diversity and excellence in all our endeavors.
- We affirm the dignity of all individuals and strive to uphold a just community in which discrimination and hate are not tolerated.
- We are committed to ensuring freedom of expression and dialogue that elicits the full spectrum of views held by our varied communities.
- We respect the differences as well as the commonalities that bring us together and call for civility and respect in our personal interactions.
- We believe that active participation and leadership in addressing the most pressing issues facing our local and global communities are central to our educational mission.
- We embrace open and equitable access to opportunities for learning and development as our obligation and goal.

UC Berkeley's "Principles of Community" statement was developed collaboratively by students, faculty, staff, and alumni, and issued by the Chancellor. Its intent is to serve as an affirmation of the intrinsic and unique value of each member of the UC Berkeley community and as a guide for our personal and collective behavior, both on campus and as we serve society.

These principles do not replace existing personnel policies and codes of conduct:

- Campus Administrative Policies and Procedures
- Code of Student Conduct
- Faculty Code of Conduct (PDF)
- Staff Personnel Policies
- Academic Personnel Manual

Code of Ethics:

Standards of Practice: