

North Carolina State University
STUDENT OMBUDS SERVICES (S.O.S.)
ACTIVITY DATA - FALL 2014: Preliminary Report

This report is a record and communication of activities of the newly established Student Ombuds Services, preliminary to an annual report to be submitted at the completion of the academic year.

NC State University, through the leadership and vision of the Vice Chancellor and Dean of the Division of Academic and Student Affairs, established the position of Student Ombuds to begin with the Fall 2014 semester providing services to the University community. Student Ombuds Services is committed to function according to the principles espoused by the International Ombudsman Association. They are Independence, Neutrality, Confidentiality, and Informality. S.O.S. applies these as principles of practice alongside the unique features, opportunities, and needs of NC State's undergraduate and graduate students, and the university community.

Class Absence Verification and Notification

One of the unique responsibilities of NC State's S.O.S. is to work alongside students to verify reasons for class absences. While this seemingly administrative task may appear mundane and impersonal, the opposite is true. The empty seats in our classrooms are frequently visible indicators of student issues or concerns which may challenge degree progress, and which may benefit by problem-solving or the identification of resources by the Ombuds. Additional tangible outcomes have included improved student-advisor-instructor communication, the establishment of a grief support group by the University Counseling Center, and renewed conversations and planning for short-term emergency student loans. The verification of student absences – learning the rest of the story – is an important demonstration of institutional awareness, concern and responsiveness for students and their families during times of need.

Reason for Absence		Undergraduate	Graduate	Other (NDS)	
Medical (illness, injury, other)	Student	79	5	0	84
	Family	12	0	0	12
	Friend	2	0	0	2
Death	Student	1	1	0	2
	Grandparent	17	0	0	17
	Parent	6	0	0	6
	Sibling	4	0	0	4
	Other Family	11	0	1	12
	Friend	3	0	0	3
Mental Health	Student	21	1	0	22
Religious		4	0	0	4
Military		1	0	0	1
Other		7	0	1	8
TOTALS		168	7	2	177

Issues and Concerns (not class absence related)

Eighty-four unique individuals with concerns unrelated to absence verification were seen by the Student Ombuds. Most face-to-face appointments were one or two visits with follow-up

communication by phone and email. Three more complex cases required numerous face-to-face visits and follow-up, including some informal investigation and observation (one graduate student seen >8 times; one undergraduate student seen >20 times; one NDS student seen >5 times). Although each concern was unique, themes of concerns have been identified, informing the list of institutional recommendations that follows in this report.

Issues and Concerns (not class absence related)

Constituents	Number of Contacts
Graduate Students	29
Undergraduate Students	69
NDS Students	10
Students' Family Member	9
Faculty	4
Staff	11
Administrator	2
Government Agency	1
TOTAL	134

Although the data shown above demonstrate that registered students are the primary constituents served by S.O.S., sometimes that constituency is also well served when those with whom they interact on campus have an informal, impartial, independent, and confidential space to talk through situations, options, and next steps with the Student Ombuds. The Ombuds is not an advocate for the student; rather the Ombuds advocates for fair processes which are likely to involve both students and other university personnel. The S.O.S. environment – a “safe” space – provides each individual the room to think through issues and processes that may impact students prior to decision-making and action-taking.

Examples of Student Concerns and Issues Presented to the Student Ombuds

- Graduate committee member seen as “bullying”
- Support to families of deceased students
- Coaching for difficult conversations between student and instructor, student and parent
- Concern regarding equitable treatment during student conduct process
- Misunderstood brochure statement resulting in unanticipated tuition costs
- Application of regulations to NDS students
- Anticipating loss of financial support/scholarship
- Grade change processes
- Navigating appeals process regarding in-state residency
- Approval for religious holy day absences; interpretation of SL 2010-211
- Need for objective guidance through grievance processes
- Student conduct hearing preparation
- Serve as impartial observer in department-student process regarding plagiarism
- Challenge to “continuous enrollment” requirement of Graduate School

- Perceived obstacles to degree matriculation
- Uncertainty regarding protocol for review for transcript adjustment
- Perceived harassment due to reduction in tutorial hours
- Denial of acceptance into graduate program
- Dismissal from graduate program
- Providing guidance to staff on university sponsored event absence letter
- Discussion of “next step” options with suspended students
- Student refused entry to class by instructor due to tardiness
- Consideration (by staff) of filing report regarding concerning student behaviors
- General “upset” with instructors’ behaviors; perceptions of disrespect toward student
- Identification of alternative transportation options for temporary mobility challenges
- Student vs. student contract disputes (e.g. apartment lease dispute mediation)
- Facilitating information exchange across several offices regarding student-in-common
- International student facing deportation for employment above maximum federal limits
- Graduate students challenging physical space needs provided them by University Architect’s Office and college space authority
- Instructor operating class inconsistent with syllabus descriptors regarding grading
- Identification of mentoring resource for struggling student
- Complaint re: on-campus housing timely and appropriate response to student concern
- Discontinuance of student from auxiliary Graduate School program
- Requests for confidential consultation to explore options in difficult situations (primarily students, but advisors, faculty, administrators, and counseling center staff also served)

Among the issues and concerns listed above, the Student Ombuds is tasked with identifying where there may be themes or trends that can be used to inform adjustments and initiatives for institutional improvement. Identification of these areas of concern precedes formulation of possible institutional responses.

Concern Themes (i.e. presented by multiple individuals or requiring substantial involvement)

- Poor communication with graduate advisor (i.e. non-responsive, unhelpful)
- Perceived disrespectful / bullying behavior on part of graduate advisor, graduate committee member, faculty
- Academic suspension, protocol, options (e.g. impact of grade exclusion policy on 1st semester students)
- Grade grievances
- Lack of clarity in printed program information leading to unexpected student costs
- Need to practice/plan for difficult communication with person in power
- Residency determination process
- Identification of campus resources
- Need for navigating existing institutional processes
- Loss of or complication related to campus employment
- Roommate conflicts

Recommendations for Institutional Improvement

An essential role of the Student Ombuds is to create an environment that encourages students (and others) to share their experiences candidly and without fear of retaliation. Because an Ombuds operates impartially and independently from the university, but is familiar with its systems and processes, the Ombuds is in the uniquely valuable position to objectively communicate with university leaders regarding potential opportunities for improvement; this function benefits both the institution and its students. The recommendations that follow are intended to promote awareness and improvement, and to encourage thoughtful and informed action by those closest to affecting positive change. While the Ombuds has no authority to make decisions for the institution, the expectation is that administrative units related to these recommendations will be motivated to actively respond.

	Administrative Unit	Program or Activity	Recommendation
1.			
2.			
3.			
4.			
5.			
6.			
7.			
8.			
9.			
10.			
Recommendations Already Completed			

Necessary to the establishment of an aspirational resource such as Student Ombuds Services have been meetings, presentations and conversations which served to educate and raise awareness of the potential and value of Ombuds work. The following are groups and individuals with which – with whom - the Student Ombuds met to introduce, educate, and by whom to be educated regarding the nascent S.O.S. concept. These interactions also served to design and define the roles S.O.S. might initially incorporate, and hopefully planted seeds for what it can become as it continues to develop as a dynamic construct for the university and its students.

On-Campus Presentations & Informational Meetings Regarding Student Ombuds Services

- Student Senate
 - University Graduate Student Association
 - Staff Senate
 - Associate Deans Council
 - Faculty Development Center
 - Faculty Senate Chair
 - Risk Assessment Case Manager
 - University General Counsel
 - Associate Vice Provost for Equal Opportunity and Equity; Title IX Officer
 - Campus Police; Chief, and Support Services, Major
 - First Year College Advisors
 - Academic Support Program for Student Athletes
 - Life Sciences First Year Program Advisors
 - Directors of Undergraduate Advising - CHASS
 - University Counseling Center
 - GLBT Center Associate Director
 - Student Legal Services
 - Goodnight Scholars
 - Graduate School Administrators
-

The individual charged with establishing Student Ombuds Services at NC State was himself new to the role and concept. The following training opportunities in which the Student Ombuds engaged complemented the breadth and depth of knowledge and experience and better prepared the Ombuds for this important work.

Training and In-Services Completed

- Foundations of Organizational Ombudsman Practice: a program in the basic theory and practice of the ombudsman profession; training by the International Ombudsman Association (April 4-6, 2014; Denver, CO)
- International Ombudsman Association Annual Conference – multiple Ombuds themed workshops presented by seasoned professionals Ombuds (April 7-9, 2014; Denver, CO)
- Employment Mediation (40 hour) Training; Carolina Dispute Settlement Services, North Carolina State Personnel Office (April 28 – May 2, 2014; Raleigh, NC)
- Uniform State Residency Training; University of North Carolina – General Administration (June 11, 2014; Chapel Hill, NC)
- Relationship and Sexual Violence (RSVP) Phone Line Training Course; training by the NCSU Women’s Center (March-April, 2014; NCSU Campus)
- A Multicultural Perspective on Suicide Prevention; (2/10/14; NCSU Campus)
- Working Effectively and Affirmatively With Lesbian Clients (2/26/14; Counseling Center In-Service; NCSU Campus)
- The Devastating Impact of Bullying; (2/26/14; Counseling Center In-Service; NCSU Campus)

- North Carolina Ombuds Day Conferences; Informal discussion and consultation among other in-state corporate, municipal and university Ombuds; coordinated by UNC-CH and the Chapel Hill Police Department Ombuds offices (6/3/14, 11/12/14; Chapel Hill, NC)
- Trauma Resiliency Model; (10/15/14; Counseling Center In-Service; NCSU Campus)
- Microaggressions in Everyday Life: Implications for Higher Education. Campus presentation by Dr. Derald Wing Sue (10/22/14; Hunt Library, NCSU Campus)
- Mentoring Graduate Students, faculty panel on effective mentoring; Graduate School (11/10/14; NCSU Campus)

In addition to being responsive to issues and concerns presented by students, Student Ombuds Services aspires to continue and further develop outreach capacities. The Student Ombuds served as consultant, facilitator and educator on topics related to diversity, controversy, effective communication, leadership and problem-solving through the following programs.

Outreach: Program Presentation/Consultation/Participation

- *NCSU College of Veterinary Medicine.* Co-planned and co-facilitated multiple diversity discussion sessions under the leadership of the CVM administrative cabinet and the CVM diversity committee (9 meetings, April – December, 2014)
- *“Managing Difficult Conversations.”* Co-facilitated instructional workshop, teaching skills to workplace managers for responding appropriately to oppressive and discriminatory speech and actions. 2nd Annual Conference on Leadership and Diversity, Office of Institutional Equity and Diversity (10/9/14; NCSU Campus)
- *NCSU College of Agriculture and Life Sciences, Office of Diversity Affairs;* invited speaker to kick-off “Food for Thought Lunch and Learn Series” of presentations and interactions regarding diversity and inclusion within CALS (9/16/14)
- *“Building Bridges: Strengthening Leadership for Diverse Communities,”* Co-facilitated several half- and full-day workshops focused on prejudice reduction and diversity training for students, staff, faculty and community members; sponsored by the NC State Affiliate Chapter of the National Coalition Building Institute (6/25, 7/9, 9/12, 9/19, 10/31, 11/6; 119 participants collectively)
- *Parent and Student Panel,* College of Veterinary Medicine, Office of Diversity and Multicultural Affairs (6/12/14)
- *Surviving/Thriving Your First Year of College: Lessons from a Marathoner;* Campus Connections Program Series for New Students (8/19/14; 30 attendees; NCSU’s New Student Programs)
- *Students in Distress;* Panel presentation for faculty; co-presented with Counseling Center Psychologist, & Student Behavioral Case Manager (9/30/14, Faculty Development Ctr.)
- *Creation of an Effective Diversity Leadership Course;* North Carolina College Personnel Association, regional presentation (10/2/14; Friday Institute, NCSU Campus)
- *Student Emergency Fund* – a student with concerns regarding other students with short-term food and shelter challenges came to S.O.S. for support in developing an institutional response. The student was assisted in connecting with Student Leadership and Engagement which set up this initial coordination and planning meeting with appropriate campus representatives (10/17/14; NCSU Campus)

Teaching / Counseling

- *Grief Support Group*, University Counseling Center. In collaboration with counseling staff, co-facilitated weekly group in support of students who have experienced and are adjusting to the loss or anticipated death of a significant person in their lives (7 student participants in fall '14 semester; eight 1 ½ hour meetings, four 1hr. planning meetings)
 - *Leadership and Coalition Building in Diverse Communities* (USC240); 59 students have completed this UCCC/CUE approved undergraduate GEP diversity course in its 3 semesters. Thirty (30 = capacity) students are registered for Spring 2015
 - *Race, Ethnicity, Color & Nationality Panel Discussion*; Developing Cross-Cultural Competence for Professional Success (10/7/14; ECD225; 30 students)
-

Establishing Student Ombuds Services: Actions and Recommendations

Because Ombuds services are a new construct on the NC State campus, in order to become operational Student Ombuds Services first needed infrastructure and operating tools. Multiple DASA programs, especially the Department of Student and Community Standards, but also Technology Services, and Marketing and Communications provided significant, continuous resources and support for the establishment of the following elements.

S.O.S. Infrastructure

- Physical office established; 308 Clark Hall
 - Informational brochure created and distributed (10,000)
 - Student Ombuds business card w. definition of “ombuds;” (1,000)
 - Creation of PowerPoint slide set for use during presentations regarding S.O.S.
 - Student Ombuds position description drafted
 - Student Ombuds Services “Terms of Reference” drafted; shared for comment
 - Student Ombuds Services “Agreement to Mediate” document constructed
 - Website launched - “ombuds.ncsu.edu”; FAQ section populated
 - “student-ombuds@ncsu.edu” address created as option for student connection to S.O.S.
 - “Ask the Ombuds” on-line form created to ease access for students to submit questions
 - S.O.S. assessment form drafted; once approved by DASA Assessment Office, link for completing assessment will be emailed to each client for evaluation and improvement
 - Established protocols for receiving and responding to student concerns routed through the following existing offices/structures:
 - DASA Administrative Office: notice of student death; referral of parent/student requests of Vice-Chancellor, Provost, Chancellor for response; response to questions posted to on-line PRRs
 - Campus Police: S.O.S. initiated 53 email contacts to students identified via the Daily Activity Report (DAR); 20 students and/or family members responded to outreach
 - Student Legal Services: make referrals for student-vs-student mediation services
 - Counseling Center: receive referrals from the CC, and also make referrals of students in crisis, especially identification of students affected by personal loss and grief
 - First Year First Term Survey: S.O.S. now notified by survey administrators of students who through the survey have requested intervention or follow-up
-

The Student Ombuds temporarily retained two areas of significant responsibility from a previous position within DASA's Academic Programs and Services subdivision. With the support of DASA leadership and staff, these areas are in the process of fully transitioning to another coordinator and chair. The Student Ombuds will play a diminishing resource role to ensure successful changeovers.

Common Reading Committee

- S.O.S. continued to provide support and guidance as an active participant and coordinator of this initiative in support of the Provost, current and past chairs, selected authors, and the CRC's new coordinator, Michael Coombes.
- Termination of S.O.S. Common Reading responsibilities will be complete in the Spring 2015 semester.

Residency Appeals Board

- The Board had 10 appeals hearings since the start of the semester
- Total of 64 student appeals heard (8/28-12/8)
- The Board affirmed 49 (77%) and overturned 15 initial nonresident classifications (23%)
- Preparation for hearings and follow-up communication with appellants required approximately 5 hours / week of Ombuds time.
- Termination of S.O.S. responsibilities with the RAB will begin sometime in the Spring, 2015 semester. Justine Hollingshead has been identified as its new chair.

Recommendations for Student Ombuds Services

1. The SOS physical location should be separate from Student Conduct offices so as to not unintentionally present the appearance of a conflict of interest, especially for those students who come to the Student Ombuds with concerns regarding the Student Conduct process or treatment. A location that promotes the confidentiality of and ease of access by student visitors (e.g. D.H. Hill Library) ought to be explored.
2. Develop with the Faculty Ombuds a collaborative vision for creation of a University Ombuds Office which works potentially with all constituents - students, faculty and staff. Student concerns are always relational, never isolated; a collaborative expansion that fades the lines between constituent groups would serve students and the university community more comprehensively and efficiently.
3. Complete assessment planning for continuous program improvement.
4. Establish S.O.S. as a graduate student practicum/internship site. A graduate assistant could provide the following services:
 - a. development and delivery of training modules regarding topics of student-interest (e.g. conflict management, preparing for difficult conversations)
 - b. initiate outreach to students transported to hospitals as identified by the Daily Activity Report (DAR)
 - c. provide first line of response to questions submitted through the website tool, conducting informal research on presented issues where needed
 - d. respond to selected communication received via student-ombuds@ncsu.edu email
 - e. distribute, receive, and organize participant responses to program assessment tool

- f. verify class absence documentation (e.g. search for obituaries, medical notes), and prepare email confirmation for communicating to faculty, students, and academic advisors (to be approved by Student Ombuds prior to sending)

Concluding Statement

The establishment of Student Ombuds Services has been an idea and the subject of conversation for decades at NC State. It is hoped that this initial preliminary report provides evidence that affirms the value of that idea and the commitment of this University to its students' welfare. The visionary leaders whose bold action established this resource for students include Provost Warwick Arden, Vice Chancellor and Dean Michael Mullen, Vice Provost Lisa Zapata, Director Monica Osburn, and most especially Director Paul Cousins. We are indebted to each of them.

Submitted February 5, 2015 by Roger A.E. Callanan, Ed.D.
Student Ombuds, Assistant Vice Provost