

## Report of the University Ombuds to the Faculty Senate

November 19, 2015

### **I. Ombuds' Jurisdiction and Procedures**

The Provost and the Faculty Senate appointed professors Emeriti Gerry Tyler and Alfred Killilea the University Ombuds in the spring of 2014. The services of the Ombuds are available to anyone in the URI community who feels he or she has been treated unfairly by someone in authority at URI and who has not been able to find redress of the grievance. To quote from the University Manual (2.39.10): "The services of the Ombud are an exceptional administrative procedure to be used only when the normal channels do not adequately respond."

The Manual describes the powers of the Ombud as follows (2.39.16): The Ombud shall "have access to all records pertinent to any allegation of inequality or injustice or other grievance coming under his/her jurisdiction; the right to inquire of any officer of instruction or of administration, or of any member of the clerical and custodial staffs, or of any student, in connection with his/her proper inquiries and to receive full and complete answers; the right to mediate or otherwise arrive at a compromise or to arrive at his/her own proposal for solution of the problem at hand; the right to present his/her recommendations for solution to the parties involved and to report such recommendations to the supervisory officers of the person(s) involved and to the office of the President and to the Chairperson of the Faculty Senate."

While the Manual makes it clear that the services of the Ombud are a last resort, we discovered almost immediately that it was very important to meet the individuals requesting our services right away to discuss their complaints and to assist them in navigating the channels relevant to their grievances.

Appeals that are made to the Ombuds are treated with strict confidentiality. Between Spring 2014 and the beginning of the Fall 2015 semester we received 36 appeals from students, faculty and staff. In most cases we were able to achieve an outcome satisfactory to the appellant. Even when we could not find grounds for changing a policy or decision that was the cause of a grievance, almost all appellants were grateful to have their issue receive careful attention. All of the faculty and University officials with whom we pursued our cases were receptive, cooperative and candid. The break down of the 36 cases we worked on in this period was as follows: Faculty: 6, Staff: 1, Graduate Students: 10, Undergraduate students: 19.

## **II. Recommendations**

### **FACULTY SENATE**

While privacy concerns keep us from describing particular cases, we can draw some recommendations to the attention of the Faculty Senate from some of the cases we considered.

#### **1. Privacy rights**

We know that faculty are cautioned every semester to be sensitive to the legal requirements of respecting students' privacy rights. In our view, these cautions need to be strengthened and chairs need to address the issue annually at department meetings. It takes only one faculty member who is not informed on this issue to create a major controversy that can damage reputations and have widespread legal repercussions.

#### **2. Plagiarism**

Similarly, we know that the Provost's office reminds Faculty each semester to make clear on their syllabi what constitutes plagiarism and what the penalties will be for academic dishonesty. However, there appears to be substantial confusion in students at all levels, including

graduate students, as to what constitutes plagiarism, and we think it is imperative that faculty spend time educating students on what is permitted and not permitted in this area. Even if it is only a small number of students who need this clarification, the result of being uninformed for these students is sometimes academically catastrophic.

### 3. Accommodations for faculty and students with disabilities

Finally, we have been surprised at the unawareness among some chairs and faculty of what is required in accommodating faculty and students with certified disabilities. There seems to be a need for more training of chairs in particular in how to respond to requests for accommodations.

## ADMINISTRATIVE UNITS

We have also made recommendations to several administrative units on campus based on issues raised in the cases before us. We are pleased to report that in each situation the administrators involved were receptive to our findings, and interested in explaining how the issues we raised fit into the larger picture in their units. They were most willing to discuss our recommendations.

## **III. Increase in Ombuds nationally and internationally**

In the Summer of 2015, we began to take note of the role of Ombuds nationally and internationally. In the last ten years the use and importance of Ombuds has increased in academia, businesses, the health industry and more. In 2005 The International Ombudsman Association (IOA) was founded with the purpose of supporting Organizational Ombuds. Ombud offices in academia are being revived and expanded. For example, in 2013 the President of UConn revived the Ombuds Office that was previously in place from 1970 to 1991. After a national search James Wohl, previously Ombudperson at Auburn University, became UConn's new Ombud. On a regional level, we have been invited to join the East Coast Ombuds Group (ECOG). In October

Gerry represented us at an all day meeting of ECOG at MIT. We have just begun to explore these connections and will have more to report about this next year.

It has been a satisfying experience for the two of us to serve as Ombuds in the past year. We have been able to relieve some people of the burden of unfair or inappropriate treatment and we have served as an institutional safety valve in a University with 20,000 students. We are convinced by our work over the past year that the role of the Ombud at URI, while informal and sometimes barely visible, is truly essential.

Professor Emeritus Alfred Killilea

Professor Emerita Gerry Tyler