
THE OMBUDSPERSON'S ROLE IN HIGHER EDUCATION

By Stella Ramirez Greig

"Call the women's residence hall—ombuds case," was my husband's greeting as I arrived home from Thursday-night grocery shopping.

"I know it's late," the dean apologized, "but it's a case of sexual harassment. We'd really like you to come and talk to the student right now if you could." I put away the groceries and headed for campus.

Being an ombudsperson is a lot like being an obstetrician or pastor: When people call, you drop everything and go to them. However, unlike telling someone you are a doctor or pastor, when you say you are an ombudsperson you often get a puzzled look in return.

Defining the Role

The office of ombudsperson¹ originated in Sweden at the beginning of the 19th century. It was designed to give citizens a way to deal with governmental "bureaucratic abuse."² Although appointed by the legislature, the ombudsperson was to be independent as well as impartial, and his or her work could not be interfered with. In investigating cases, the ombudsperson checked to see if official procedures had been followed, and whether the government agency or person had acted reasonably and civilly. While the jurisdiction of the ombudsperson was rather wide, his or her authority was limited to moral persuasion.

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The Swedish model of ombudsperson has been adopted by other countries and has been adapted by business companies and other institutions.

Background

The establishment of an office of ombudsperson at Andrews University originated with a suggestion from the Parents Advisory Board in the early 1980s. Parents wanted someone available to help students resolve the complex problems that remained after working through normal channels.

Dwain Ford was appointed by the university president as Andrews' first ombudsperson in 1981 when he stepped down from the deanship of the College of Arts and Sciences. The re-

sponsibility was factored in as part of his teaching load. When the case load became too heavy, a second person, Gary Land, was appointed, and cases were divided according to their undergraduate or graduate student status.

Currently, the two university ombudspersons are Walter Douglas and myself. Individuals with complaints are free to go to either. Having ombudspersons of both genders gives students a choice according to the subject matter of the complaint or personal preference. Since the ombudspersons are also teaching faculty, having two individuals also helps avoid conflicts of interest.

Although the Andrews University office of ombudsperson was originally created to help students resolve difficult situations, occasionally faculty and staff members also ask for assistance.

Basic Structure

As Andrews' first ombudsperson, Ford laid out a modus operandi that remains as the basic structure of ombudswork today. It combines the biblical model of settling differences with the modern ombuds model. Initially, students are encouraged to attempt resolution of the problem themselves. To facilitate resolution, the ombudsperson assists them in:

1. defining the problem;
2. classifying it into one of three areas: academic, financial, or social; and

3. identifying the chain of command of university personnel to contact, up to the vice-president who deals with the specific area of the problem.

Procedures

The student is encouraged to first talk to those most concerned with the problem, and then to contact the individuals in the chain of command for help. If the difficulty remains, the student can ask the ombudsperson to act in his or her behalf.

At this stage, I ask the student to summarize his or her actions and findings thus far. Then I say that I must interview the other individual(s) involved in the situation to get that perspective. And finally, I discuss with the student several courses of action I or we could take and ask which one he or she wants me to pursue.

As ombudsperson, I never act in a case without the knowledge of my clients, and I seek their input in deciding what course of action to take. This not only highlights the student's ownership of the problem, but also emphasizes the confidential nature of our discussion. However, I tell the students that, in order to talk to the other individual, I

must first inform the person that I know about the difficulty.

During my interviews, I am sometimes able to work out a resolution. Other times, I suggest a meeting between the two parties during which I serve as a mediator. Finally, if I cannot resolve the problem, the student can appeal to the university president for a hearing. Fortunately, this last resort is seldom required. If the problem is insoluble, or if it turns out that the student is wrong, I try to help the individual understand his or her problem and relate better to the issue.

Occasionally, for a variety of reasons, a student is reluctant to talk to the other individual or to those in the chain of command, and asks me to mediate immediately. Additionally, in some cases taking the problem all the way up the chain of command might aggravate or exaggerate the difficulty rather than resolve the situation.

How It Works

An example of these concerns was the sexual harassment incident referred to at the beginning of this article. After I listened to Portia's account of the incident as well as background informa-

tion, we discussed several possible courses of action:

1. She could confront the individual, sharing her feelings about his actions, and tell him that if he did not desist, she would go to his immediate superior;

2. I could go to the individual in her stead and convey her feelings;

3. We could go together; or

4. Since it had been a relatively mild form of harassment, she could ignore it and act further only if it happened again.

As Portia and I discussed the possibilities, she decided that she wanted me to confront the individual on her behalf. It was past midnight by the time she reached this conclusion. For this reason, and because I would not be able to contact the individual until after the weekend, I told her that if she had additional instructions or a change of mind, she should feel free to contact me.

Early the next morning, Portia phoned. She had decided to see the individual herself. I assured her that this would be acceptable. However, by the end of the day, she had changed her mind

Continued on page 45

Editorial

Continued from page 4

God has set for us as Adventist teachers, administrators, and students.—R.E.G.

REFERENCES

1. "Enrollment Trends in SDA Education," Report to the Annual Council, Department of Education, General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, 1991, Silver Spring, Maryland.
2. North American Division, SDA Church, "Valuegenesis Report 1" (October 1, 1990), Project Affirmation, North American Division, General Conference of SDA, Silver Spring, Md., p. 30.
3. Ellen G. White, *Education* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press Publ. Assoc., 1903), p. 18.

THE OMBUDSPERSON'S ROLE IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Continued from page 29

again and decided not to do anything. Finally, on Sunday, Portia phoned to happily inform me that she had telephoned the person. He seemed genuinely surprised at her reaction to his behavior, and she felt the situation had been resolved. When I checked with her several weeks later, she told me that the offensive behavior had not recurred.

While Portia's case might be considered as misinterpretation of behavior, difficulties often arise because of a difference in focus or emphasis. An example of this was Igor's problem with the student finance office. When Igor came to see me, he confided that the office personnel did not seem to appreciate what a good, dedicated student he was. Even though he spent all his time studying or in class and had good grades, they were refusing to let him complete registration. When I interviewed individuals at the student finance

office, they complained that Igor was an undependable student. He missed payment deadlines and failed to keep his financial commitments or promises.

Each party had focused on the aspect of student life he or she considered most important. To bring this problem to resolution, it was necessary to check with the student financial-aid office, Igor's dean for aid and scholarship money, and to bring the two sides together for dialogue. After acknowledging the importance of different aspects of a student's responsibilities, each side agreed to a course of action that led to the completion of Igor's registration.

Occasionally, problems result from a hasty decision made by a harried, tired staff member or administrator. In cases like this it is important for the ombudsperson to help the individual recognize the mistake and find a way to achieve resolution without loss of face.

The University's Conscience

In some instances personnel, while acting within the letter of university policy and procedures, have failed to be true to the spirit of university goals and purposes. The ombudsperson has a good vantage point from which to identify excesses in policy and causes for student concern. Thus, one role of the ombudsperson is to act as the conscience of the university. He or she can recommend ways to eliminate the causes of student concerns as well as suggest changes in policy.

In preparing this article, I surveyed Adventist colleges and universities in the United States and Canada and found that Andrews University is the only one with an ombudsperson. This does not mean that other institutions do not have problems and situations for which the office of ombudsperson would be useful. In fact, after visiting some of the campuses I would say that in many cases, even when there is no official ombudsperson on campus, certain in-

dividuals are sought out by students and fellow faculty having problems. These persons do ombuds work in an unofficial way.

A Visible Symbol

However, there are important differences between being an official ombudsperson and an unofficial one. First, an official designation makes ombudwork someone's specific responsibility, not something that happens haphazardly. Second, an official ombudsperson's title is a visible symbol of designated responsibility and institutional commitment to fairness and problem-solving. It lets students know where to go for help, and it lets faculty and staff know who has a right to investigate the problem. Third, by virtue of his or her office an official ombudsperson has certain rights, especially the right of access to records and other material useful in resolving difficult cases. And finally, the appointment gives the ombudsperson moral authority as he or she attempts to address complicated issues.

Every Adventist college experiences difficulties in which an ombudsperson would serve a helpful role. However, the larger the institution and the more complex its bureaucracy, the more likely that the office of ombudsperson is needed and will serve as a helpful go-between and arbiter of campus problems. ❧

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NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. The noun in Swedish is *ombud*. In English, one often sees the term *ombudsman* used. For the purpose of inclusion, I use the term *ombudsperson*.
2. *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 15th edition, vol. 8 (Chicago: Encyclopaedia Britannica, Inc., 1989), p. 946.
3. To ensure privacy, names have been changed.

Pontius' Puddle

