

GRINNELL COLLEGE
OFFICE OF THE OMBUDS

2014-2015 ANNUAL REPORT

OMBUDS
CHINYERE UKABIALA

JRC 311
Phone: 641-269-9399
Email: Ukabiala@grinnel.edu

**Grinnell College
Office of the Ombuds**

Annual Report
February 2014 – July 2015

Table of Contents

OVERVIEW	1
ROLE OF THE OMBUDS OFFICE	2
RELEVANT PROFESSIONAL STANDARDS	2
DATA COLLECTION	3
TYPE OF DATA COLLECTED	3
SCOPE OF DATA REPORTED	3
VISITOR CONCERNS.....	3
DEMOGRAPHICS	4
TABLE 1: 2014 – 2015 CONTACTS	4
TABLE 2: SERVICES PROVIDED	5
TABLE 3: INTERNATIONAL OMBUDSMAN ASSOCIATION CODES	6
TABLE 4: ISSUES: REASONS FOR CONTACT WITH THE OMBUDS OFFICE	7
CAMPUS CONCERNS	8
HIGHLIGHTS OF THE OMBUDS OFFICE ACTIVITIES.....	11
OUTREACH.....	12
PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT	12
CONCLUSION	12

Overview

This report is a summary of the work of the Grinnell College Ombuds Office in its second year of operation. The Ombuds Office was established on February 2, 2013. The office is staffed by a full time Ombuds, Chinyere Ukabiala. The initial report published by the Ombuds Office spanned the period between the inception of the office on February 3, 2013, through January 2, 2014, representing a full year of operation. This second report spans the period between February 2014 to July 2015, representing seventeen months of operation, and bringing the report in line with Grinnell College fiscal year. The Ombuds Office busiest months this year were February, (30 visitors) April, (30 visitors) July, (23) and December (20 visitors).

The report provides information about the number of contacts the office has had with members of the campus community, and the number and types of issues presented, for which the Ombuds provided assistance. It also describes some of the trends the Ombuds

has observed and offers some recommendations. Finally, it outlines the Ombuds Office outreach efforts, professional activities, accomplishments, and future goals.

Role of the Ombuds Office

The Ombuds Office at Grinnell College was established primarily for the purpose of conflict prevention and resolution. It is a place where the community can come to share their concerns, and receive constructive assistance. Thus individuals are firmly encouraged to utilize the office not just as a last resort, but also as a recourse of early resort. The confidential nature of the office is the predominant feature that sets the Ombuds Office apart from other offices on campus. People bring issues that are often sensitive in nature to the Ombuds. They are seeking a safe space to share their concerns and need to be reassured that what is communicated in the Ombuds Office stays in the Ombuds Office.

The Ombuds Office assists faculty, students, staff, administrators, and parents in managing and resolving campus-related conflicts, complaints and disputes. The office utilizes alternative methods of dispute resolution to work with individuals experiencing conflict with other members of the campus community, as well as individuals with academic or administrative issues, concerns, or questions.

The Ombuds Office advocates for the core values of the college, provides informal conflict management services, and advocates for fair treatment and fair process for all. The efforts undertaken by the Ombuds Office are intended to cultivate a culture of trust, respect and collaboration, and ultimately encourage a climate that focuses on the best interest of all members of the campus community

Relevant Professional Standards

The umbrella organization for the Ombuds profession is the International Ombudsman Association (IOA), which publishes a Code of Ethics and Standards of Practice. Additional guidance for the establishment and operation of an Ombuds Office has been published by the American Bar Association (ABA) and the IOA. The ethical tenets of the Ombuds practice are:

Confidentiality – The Ombuds does not keep records for the College, and will not disclose the names or concerns of visitors, without permission. (The only exception is when the Ombuds believes there is an imminent risk of physical harm.) The Ombuds Office thus is not an office of notice for the College.

Neutrality – The Ombuds is respectfully impartial with all parties to a conflict. The Ombuds does not take sides in any dispute, but rather advocates for fair process and equitable results.

Informality – The Ombuds listens, offers information about college policies, procedures and resources, and presents a range of options for resolving problems. With permission, the Ombuds will facilitate communication or mediate a dispute. The Ombuds does not arbitrate, adjudicate or participate in formal procedures.

Independence – To ensure objectivity, the Ombuds is not aligned with any administrative unit

or office, and reports directly to the President for administrative and budgetary purposes.

These ethical tenets are absolute and non-negotiable, and belong to the Ombuds Office rather than the visitor.

Data Collection

Type of Data Collected

A goal of this annual report is to review the overall activity of the Ombuds Office, while simultaneously maintaining the confidentiality of the visitors to the office and the issues they presented. This report therefore provides general data about the number of cases, the type of visitors who sought assistance from the Ombuds Office, and the variety of issues that were of concern to visitors. A visitor is someone who visits the Office of the Ombuds and may be a student, staff, faculty, administrator, but can also include a parent or other non-Grinnell College persons as well.

Scope of Data Reported

This Report discusses approximately seventeen months of Ombuds Office activity and data, from February 2014 through June 30, 2015. Three hundred and twenty three (323) visitors contacted the Ombuds Office during this period. In comparison, the Ombuds Office saw two hundred and ten (210) visitors in the first year of operation. A visitor may come to the office on more than one occasion and present a different set of concerns. In that situation, this would constitute a separate case. Although visitors may raise many issues in discussions, only the issues for which options are discussed with them are counted. Also, while the Ombuds Office does not track this data, some people speak with the Ombuds more than one time about the same problem. While most cases involved only two or three people, some involved as many as eight people. A case involving such a large number indicates that the Ombuds Office provided a structured mediation between parties or provided group facilitation to assist groups in identifying issues and making decisions. Mediation or facilitation requires separate meetings with each individual prior to mediation or facilitation sessions. It typically takes two or three mediation sessions to reach resolution on issues. Resolution is not always reached. Regardless of this fact, the Ombuds Office may continue to work with individuals to navigate the myriad issues they are dealing with and continue to assist with managing and preventing conflict escalation.

Routine inquiries (e.g., basic referrals, requests for telephone numbers, addresses of other offices, where certain policies can be found, etc.) are not counted.

VISITOR CONCERNS

In addressing visitor concerns, the Ombuds often works one-on-one with the visitor through coaching or exploring and assessing options. But in most cases, the Ombuds works with others in the institution to help resolve issues. The Ombuds is able to work with others who may be peripherally involved in a matter, or individuals whose involvement may be instrumental in resolving a matter only upon obtaining permission from the visitor to do so.

Much of the Ombuds work involves problem-solving and conflict prevention and management. Often, the Ombuds helps visitors clarify the issues they bring to the Ombuds Office and identify options for dealing productively with those concerns. The Ombuds focuses on assisting the visitor in gaining perspective and developing skills to communicate and work more effectively with people in their unit or with other members of the college community.

Maintaining confidentiality is a key component of the Ombuds Office, the office therefore avoids maintaining any identifying information, or records of individuals visiting the office. Data regarding the number of visitors to the Ombuds Office, and the types of concerns they bring to the office is tracked in a non-identifying manner, and only for the purposes of assisting the individual and identifying concerns and trends.

Charts below show that visitors represented virtually all levels of positions and all areas within the college community. Most visitors came from the ranks of non-management staff.

DEMOGRAPHICS

Table 1: 2014 – 2015 Contacts

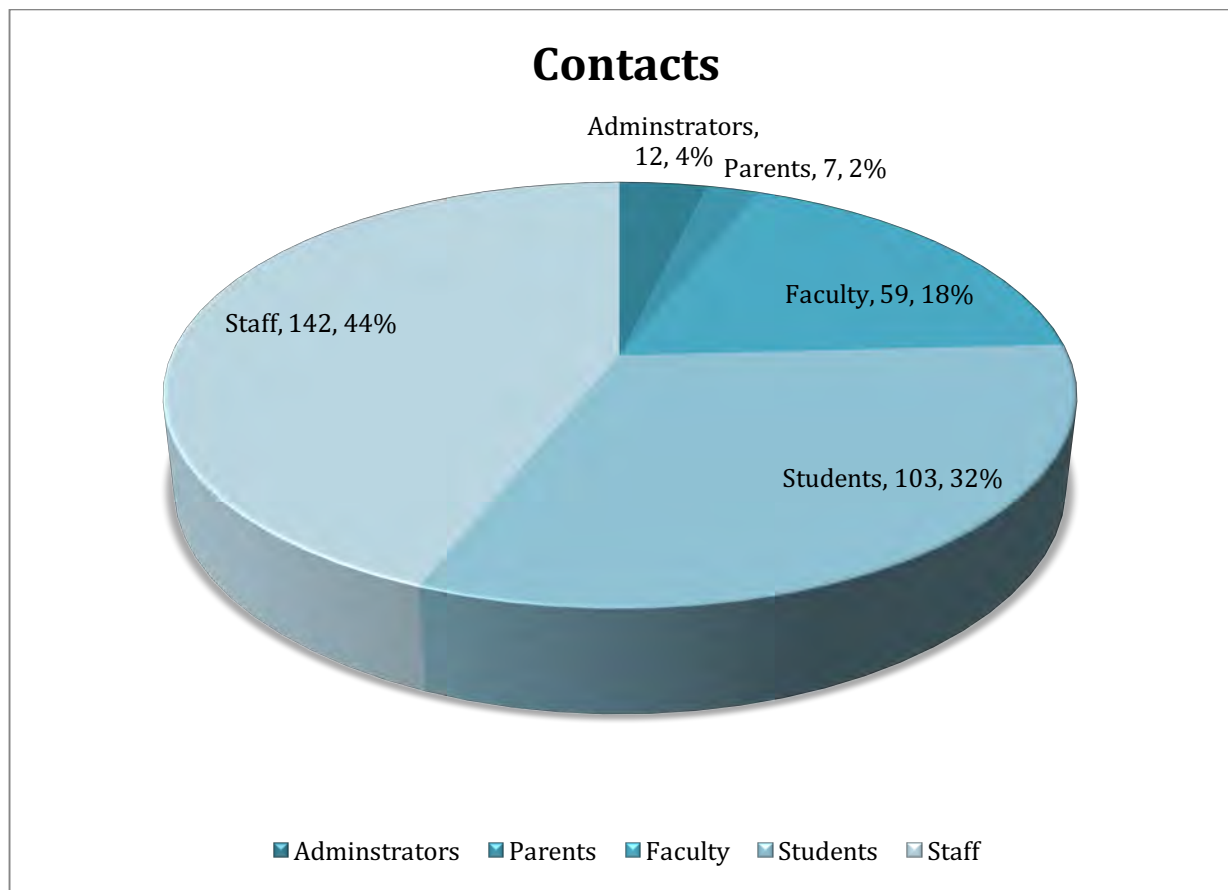
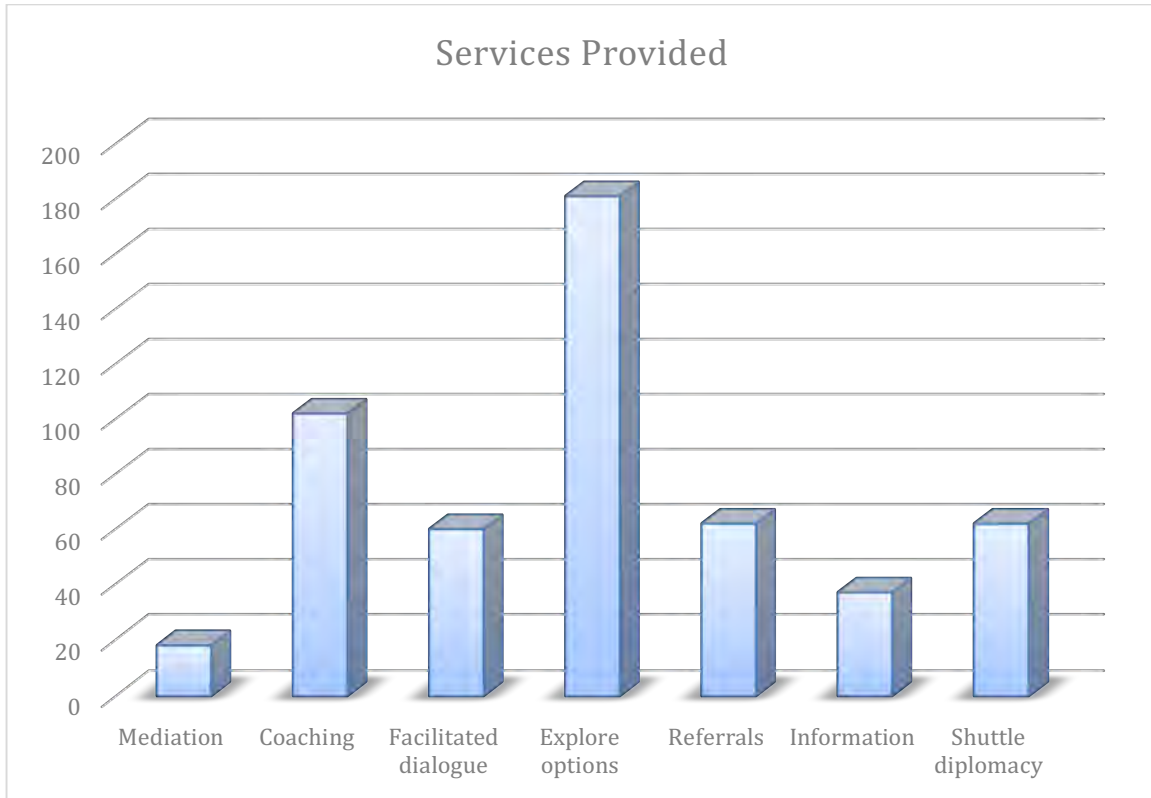


Table 2: Services Provided

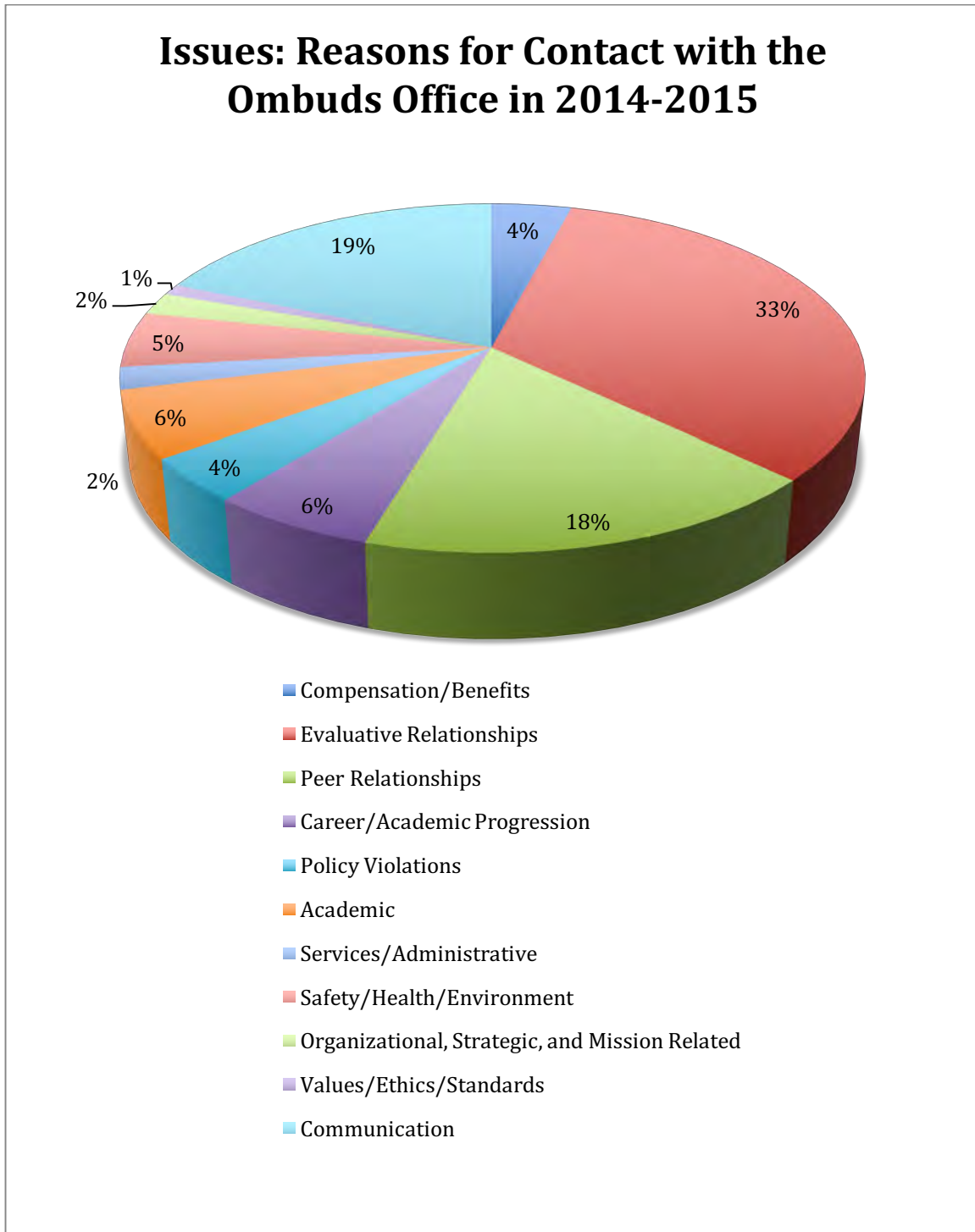


The Ombuds works with individuals in a variety of ways including: brainstorming visitor concerns, providing structured mediation services or facilitating group dialogue. Visitors to the Ombuds Office are not always aware of the various options available to them. Exploring a variety of options ranks highest on the list of services the Ombuds Office provides. Coaching visitors through difficult conversations or stressful workplace situations, rank a close second, followed by shuttle diplomacy and facilitated dialogues. Structured mediations between parties are becoming an increasingly relevant tool for the Ombuds Office in resolving a wide range of every day conflict situations.

Table 3: International Ombudsman Association Codes

Number	IOA Code	IOA Code Description
1.	Compensation/Benefits	Compensation & benefits: salary, health insurance, retirement, etc.
2.	Evaluative Relationships	Evaluative Relationships: supervisor/employee, faculty/TA/student etc.
3.	Peer Relationships	Peer/Colleague Relationships: issues about respect, trust, communications etc.
4.	Career/Academic Progression	Career/Academic Progression/Development: administrative processes and decisions, job classification, tenure, resignation, etc.
5.	Policy Violations	Violation of policy: Legal Regulatory, Financial, and Compliance: criminal activity, fraud, harassment, discrimination, disability, etc
6.	Academic	Academic Issues: grades, academic discipline, classroom, advisors
7.	Services/Administration	Services/Administration Issues: quality, timeliness of services, administrative decisions
8.	Safety/Health/Environment	Safety, Health & Physical Environment: working conditions, housing, health concerns etc.
9.	Organizational, Strategic, and Mission Related	Organizational, Strategic, & Mission Related: leadership, reorganizations, organizational climate etc.
10.	Values/Ethics/Standards	Values/ Ethics/Standards: codes of conduct, plagiarism, research misconduct, etc.
11.	Communication	Communication: Issues related to lack of communication, inability to communicate effectively, or inadequate communication

Table 4: Issues: Reasons For Contact with the Ombuds Office



CAMPUS CONCERNS

An important part of the Ombuds role is to recognize and identify systemic problems and bring such problems to the attention of the college administration. The identification of similar issues, coupled with frequency and consistency of occurrence is demonstrable evidence that a problem can be described as a systemic problem.

Based on the nature of the cases presented to the Ombuds Office this past year, there are two general issues the Ombuds Office has identified as systemic problems and would like to address. The first issue has to do with making appropriate hires – hiring the right people for the job, and providing adequate professional support for the faculty and staff we recruit. The second has to do with conflict avoidance and its inherent consequences.

It is important to note that the fact that the Ombuds Office highlights an issue does not necessarily mean that the Ombuds was directly involved. The Ombuds Office sometimes highlights themes that the office or members of the campus community have observed and brought to the attention of the Office.

Making Appropriate Hires & Providing Adequate Support

With regards to making appropriate hires and providing adequate support, how can we best support the people we recruit and ensure they are successful? It is obvious to campus that some hires made in the past few years have not worked out. Some areas as a result of inappropriate hires witnessed turnovers that were disturbing. Some concerns had to do with insufficient staffing, others were mainly a function of inadequate skills – People who did not have the skills required to manage others, or people whose personalities were not suited to the position they were placed in. Concerns ranged from not fully understanding and appreciating responsibilities to the inability to effectively complete tasks. When managerial staff are given responsibilities outside their skill level, the entire department pays the price.

The innate challenges of attracting and retaining the best personnel in a small town such as Grinnell are not insignificant. There are numerous contributing factors that make it really difficult to fill positions with the best candidates. Securing appropriate employment options for trailing partners and spouses is just one example. These concerns are by no means unique to Grinnell College. Many colleges or organizations similarly located struggle with these same issues. Negotiating these challenges can result in resorting to compromises which may seem expedient in the short run, but may be disastrous in the long run.

A focus on intentional and substantial investments in staff and in staff development will go a long way in addressing some of these concerns. Investing in search firms for critical positions is certainly helpful. The Ombuds Office would greatly encourage department heads and managers across the board to give members of their staff permission to seek and participate in professional development opportunities. Managers and supervisors should seek out, and encourage staff to participate in trainings or workshop opportunities that will enhance their performance. Managers should also consider participation in professional development opportunities for themselves a worthy investment in their careers. Hopefully such participation will send the message that acquiring the proper skills to do the job is

important and greatly encouraged. To retain the employees we recruit, we need to adequately equip and support them. Professional development opportunities need not be cost prohibitive, and can be built into departmental budgets. Departments can offer a variety of opportunities in house, but when necessary, consider inviting outside professionals to provide relevant training opportunities. Some professional development opportunities are offered through the Human Resources department, and also through the Employee Assistance Program, which the college holds a subscription to, but which it appears members of our campus community do not adequately utilize. We should also utilize other college affiliated professional organizations for the appropriate trainings.

Implementing a uniform and effective evaluation process is a critical part of providing adequate support, as is providing guidance on how to effectively give and receive feedback. The Ombuds office worked with visitors who did not have a good understanding of how their annual performance was evaluated, or the correlation between their annual evaluation and compensation. In other situations, a lack of adherence to an evaluation process meant a visitor was unsure about their performance. A comprehensive evaluation system is critical for staff and faculty development as it provides college personnel with the necessary tools for measuring growth and progress and for implementing essential processes for structured improvement.

Avoiding Conflict

The Ombuds Office has seen increased requests for mediations and facilitated dialogue. These requests are heartily welcomed as a sign that the campus community is utilizing the Ombuds Office as a valuable resource. As individuals, we all have different approaches to dealing with conflict situations, including employing compromising, competing, accommodating, collaborating and avoiding styles. Every conflict style is appropriate in different circumstances, including the avoiding style. Problems arise when one uses the same conflict style as a default for every conflict situation. Sometimes individuals are conflict averse, and rather than tackling the real causes of the conflict, or working with others to identify the issues, will put off addressing recurring conflict until matters have escalated to the point where more people than are necessary are involved in the conflict. Over avoidance is a concern when it is used as a default for dealing with every degree of conflict.

Some conflict cases involve behavior that should not be tolerated in the workplace in the first instance, but is tolerated either because the behavior is longstanding and has sadly been condoned for a long time and has not been firmly addressed. Or the problem is ignored or dismissed because no one really wants to deal with it, or everyone hopes the problem will miraculously vanish (perhaps through retirement or a move to a different department). Sometimes there is a request for a facilitated discussion. Often times, the request comes after substantial damage has already been done to the working relationship. Sadly, conflict is much more difficult to resolve when it is deeply entrenched. It is therefore important for us to understand as a community that avoidance is not always the best strategy when dealing with conflict. It is certainly understandable that individuals should shy away from addressing conflict, especially when they have not been exposed to, nor acquired the appropriate skills to competently deal with serious conflict situations. However, this type of conflict avoidance is counterproductive. The Ombuds Office emphasizes the importance of

early intervention in conflict situations and encourages individuals to address conflict at the outset rather than avoiding or ignoring the obvious signs of conflict. Conflict is an inevitable part of living and working together, therefore, developing good conflict management strategies is critical for the existence of good working relationships.

There are numerous resources available to managers and supervisors to assist them as they undertake the necessary work of conflict prevention and resolution. Resources are available through the Human Resources Department, the Employee Assistance Program, the Ombuds Office, as well as other external resources. Resource available through the Ombuds Office include Crucial Conversations workshops. The Crucial Conversations training is an invaluable tool in creating a safe and productive workplace. Crucial Conversations is a course offered by Vital Smarts, a top innovator in organizational performance. The training teaches skills for effective communication, and fostering open dialogue around high stakes, emotional, or risky topics. Providing conflict coaching, to groups as well as to individuals on how to have difficult conversations, and providing conflict prevention training workshops are just a few of the resources available to visitors who seek out the Ombuds Office for assistance. The Ombuds Office would like to seize this opportunity to remind our campus community that conflict prevention and conflict resolution are among the primary reasons the Ombuds office was established as a confidential resource for the community.

Finally, a major challenge that faced not just the Ombuds Office, but the entire campus community this year was concerns relating to Title IX, Racism, and Diversity and Inclusion. While it is unnecessary to go into in depth analysis of these issues in an annual report, it is important to note that our campus was by no means isolated in these very significant concerns. Many college campuses across the nation witnessed these same concerns and struggled with dealing with the Department of Education and Office of Civil Rights involvement. In response Grinnell College administration and staff tackled these concerns head on, involving the campus community at all levels, as well as external resources in the efforts to improve the processes and procedures governing these issues. Obviously, the work required in these areas cannot be accomplished in one year. This is ongoing work which will remain a central focus of attention.

Previous Year Concerns

In the previous year's annual report, the Ombuds Office identified three broad areas of concern:

Communication

Clarity in Processes and

Fear of Reprisal

While we have made progress in each of these areas, ensuring effective communication and clarity in processes remain areas of significant concern, as evidenced by the fact that interpersonal conflicts remain the most frequent reason for visits to the Ombuds Office. The increase in requests for mediation services, dialogue facilitated by the Ombuds Office, and training workshops in email and conflict escalation all confirm that we have significant work still to do.

Visitors continue to express frustration with the lack of clarity in procedure and various college processes. Many on campus remain concerned with the lack of procedural fairness, and want to see a transparent clearly defined process of decision making, especially when such decisions being made directly impact them. Effective communication includes not just transparency in communication, but courage and skill in the handling of difficult subjects, and in our daily interactions with one another. It is possible to get ahead of conflict by being thoughtful in the manner in which information is shared and communicated, whether we are engaged in face-to-face or electronic communication.

Email exchanges continue to represent a major source of conflict escalation. For this reason, the Ombuds Office continues to reiterate the importance of direct and personal communication when ever possible and discourages over dependence on electronic communication.

Summary of 2014 – 2015 Activities

Highlights of the Ombuds Office Activities

Highlights of the Ombuds Office accomplishment in 2014 -2015 include:

- The Ombuds Office Charter was signed by President Kington, and the Ombuds, Chinyere Ukabiala, and officially adopted on December 4, 2014. The Charter document explains that the Grinnell College Ombuds Office is a designated confidential resource, and is expected to carry out its duties consistent with the Standards of Practice and Code of Ethics of the International Ombudsman Association. The document formally implements and defines the role, purpose and responsibilities of the Ombuds Office.
- The Ombuds Office considers the Crucial Conversations training an invaluable tool in creating a safe and productive workplace. Crucial Conversations is a course offered by Vital Smarts, a top innovator in organizational performance. Crucial Conversations teaches skills for effective communication, and fostering open dialogue around high stakes, emotional, or risky topics. Chinyere completed the training and certification process for Crucial Conversations and became a Certified Crucial Conversation Trainer in March 2014. Chinyere has since provided several Crucial Conversation Training workshops to various departments across campus
- Chinyere concluded the certification process and received the International Ombudsman Association COOP certification as a Certified Organizational Ombudsman Practitioner. In the coming year, the CO-OP® Board will send a proposal to the International Ombudsman Association Board regarding the creation of an office accreditation process, and will be initiating a three-year process of evaluations. If the accreditation process is approved, organizations may apply for, and receive an organizational certification. The Ombuds Office goal is that when that event occurs, the Grinnell College Ombuds Office can apply for, and receive certification.

- Chinyere joined the Ombuds Committee of the Dispute Resolution Section of the American Bar Association.
- In collaboration with other offices on campus, Chinyere offered many trainings and made numerous presentations on a variety of topics, including: The Role of the Ombuds Office at Grinnell College, Confidentiality in Electronic Communications, Electronic Communication and Conflict Escalation, Email and Time Management, Preventing Conflict, Crucial Conversations, Difficult Conversations, etc.

Outreach

Promoting and increasing the visibility of the Ombuds Office and educating our campus community on the role of the office remain a primary focus of the Ombuds Office. Chinyere continues to make concentrated efforts to reach the different student groups to ensure that the entire student population is aware of the existence of the Ombuds Office.

Chinyere meets quarterly with senior staff, department heads, members of senior leadership and the Student Governing bodies. Additionally, The Ombuds Office sends a Welcome to Grinnell letter to all new employees, and participates in the New Employee Orientation Sessions offered every couple of months through the Human Resources Department.

Recognizing the value of honest, unfiltered feedback from individuals departing Grinnell College, the Ombuds Office routinely makes provisions for confidential exit interviews, separate and distinct from the mandatory exit interviews conducted by our Department of Human Resources

Professional Development

The Ombuds Office professional development activities this year included attending: the International Ombudsman Association Annual Conference, the Consortium of Negotiations and Conflict Resolution (CNCR) Annual Conference, and the Midwest Academic Ombuds Annual Workshop.

CONCLUSION

The Ombuds Office case activity continues to grow as members of the college community become better acquainted with the resources available through the Ombuds Office. The outreach efforts to promote the visibility of the Ombuds Office remain a top priority, especially with the student body. Comments and feedback received from visitors who have utilized the office as a confidential resource remain positive and very encouraging.

In conjunction with working on conflict resolution with individuals as well as groups, the office will continue to provide conflict prevention assistance, and conflict management tips and strategies in the form of trainings and workshops. Future plans include an expansion of conflict management trainings and a variety of workshops specifically designed to provide support for students and new supervisors and managers. This spring the Ombuds

Office looks forward to reviving the Ombuds Advisory Council, which Chinyere was compelled to place on hiatus as a result of the Ombuds Office heavy case load last fall.

The Ombuds Office remains grateful to the President's office staff, and the college community for the support of the Ombuds program. Thank you to the many offices that have referred individuals to the Ombuds Office, and to the offices that have graciously responded to requests for information and assistance. Finally, thank you to all of the students, staff, and faculty who have contacted the Ombuds Office for advice and information.