

Ombudsman takes student, faculty complaints while remaining secret

By Kristofer Karol
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Heather Spielmaker is one of perhaps several thousand MSU students who could be utilizing one of the university's best-kept secrets — the ombudsman's office.

Spielmaker hasn't, because she didn't know it existed.

"It seems like an important service," the geography and interdisciplinary studies in social science senior said. "I have a professor that's very scatterbrained and I probably wouldn't tell her that in class, but it's good ... knowing you can go somewhere without fear of the teacher knowing your name."

The ombudsman deals with

complaints that students or faculty members have with other students and staffers. He or she conducts independent investigations, keeping all sources and information confidential, unless consent is given by the parties involved.

MSU Ombudsman Stan Soffin heads the nation's oldest ombudsman office at a major U.S. university, housed in 129 North Kedzie Hall. His office is also home to a graduate assistant and administrative assistant.

"One of my goals is to try and make students more aware of the office," Soffin said. "And that is a particular concern for freshmen and sophomores who use this office the least of any group."

Carolyn Stieber, who served as the longest running ombudsman from 1974-1991, said it is important that students know there is an office that will offer an active voice on campus.

"I think it is especially important for a very large university because it is very easy for student grievances and problems to be lost in the shuffle," Stieber said. "It's important to have an office that is independent."

But Soffin stressed that officials in the Office of the Ombudsman do not always side with students.

"Many faculty members and students think this is a student-

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Ombudsman Stan Soffin stands outside of his office in 129 North Kedzie Hall. This year marks the 35th anniversary of the Office of the Ombudsman, where students and faculty members can go for confidential help with problems they have at MSU.

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advocate office," he said. "We take the side that is right and justifiable according to these rules."

President M. Peter McPherson said it is important an institution like MSU have an ombudsman's office.

"It has been a valuable offering for the university because everyone can go there with complaints and talk to someone who's ... close to the rest of the university, but not part of it," McPherson said.

Last year, the office had 1,278 complaints and about 75 percent of those complaints were academic related. The other 25 percent of complaints came from nonacademic complaints, such as

sexual harassment and racial discrimination.

Soffin said the biggest category of complaints falls under the heading "Instruction," which focuses on attendance, and the number one complaint is grading. Also, a trend in complaints during the past two years includes a 3 percent jump in academic dishonesty. Much of this can be traced to the Internet, which is offering many more resources for students to plagiarize, Soffin said.

The biggest myth that students believe is there is a university attendance policy, Soffin said.

"Most students don't know there's no attendance policy," he said. "The university attendance policy is 'show me the money.'"

Kristofer Karol can be reached at karolkri@msu.edu.