

INVESTIGATIVE REPORT

Final Finding and Closure -- Public Version

Alaska Ombudsman Complaint J096-0863

October 6, 1997

SUMMARY OF THE COMPLAINT

In May 1996 a student at the University of Alaska Southeast (UAS) contacted the Juneau Office of the Ombudsman to file a complaint against the university. The student expressed a variety of concerns about decisions made by UAS faculty and administrators that halted his progress toward a Bachelor of Liberal Arts (BLA) degree at the Juneau campus.

In particular, the student questioned the standards according to which his portfolio submissions for the Writing Proficiency Review were evaluated. Passing this review is a requirement for admission to the BLA program. The student's first portfolio submission in December 1995 was evaluated as "No Pass"; his second portfolio submission in April 1996 was given the same evaluation. The student said these evaluations seemed unfair in light of the fact that he had transferred to the Juneau campus after completing 89 credit hours at the UAS Sitka campus with a cumulative grade point average (GPA) of 3.14, including the English composition sequence, English 111 and English 211, in which he received grades of *A* and *B+*. Successful completion of these two courses is a General Education Requirement (GER) and a prerequisite for enrollment in most upper division English courses at UAS.

Moreover, four of the papers submitted with the student's second portfolio received grades of *A* and *B* from other Juneau campus instructors. He said the recommendation of the UAS Writing Assessment Coordinator that he take English 110, "Basic Writing," was unreasonable and called into question the integrity of the university's system of course numbering, because English 110 or its equivalent is prerequisite for placement in English 111, "Methods of Written Communication." He pointed to statements in the university's Academic Catalog advertising UAS as an integrated system of higher education, then pointed to his own experience as evidence that, in fact, instruction and evaluation of students at UAS are extremely inconsistent.

The student filed his complaint with Assistant Ombudsman Glenn Bacon. In accordance with AS 24.55.150, Mr. Bacon opened a complaint against the University of Alaska Southeast. When Mr. Bacon resigned from his position

in June 1996, the complaint was assigned to Assistant Ombudsman Tom Webster. Interviews and preliminary research relating to this complaint were conducted between June and November 1996. In accordance with AS 24.55.140, formal "Notice of Investigation" was mailed to UAS Chancellor Marshall Lind on June 5, 1997. Mr. Webster's investigation focused on the following allegations:

1) Unfair: staff at the UAS Juneau campus will not give full credit for prerequisite courses taken by complainant at the UAS Sitka campus. The Sitka courses taken are identical in number and title and are equivalent in content to the prerequisite courses at the Juneau campus. This decision delayed complainant's graduation and resulted in additional expense to complainant.

2) Unreasonable: university faculty failed to observe consistent standards in evaluating the complainant's writing assignments.

BACKGROUND

The student attended UAS Sitka for four semesters and one summer session between January 1994 and December 1995. He was awarded an Associate of Arts degree on May 12, 1995, and planned to pursue upper division studies at UAS Juneau leading to a BLA degree with a major emphasis in Communications. Admission to the BLA program and enrollment in upper division English courses required to complete a Communications major are contingent upon meeting General Education Requirements and the BLA Program's special course requirements with a cumulative GPA of 2.5, and passing the BLA Writing Proficiency Review. During his last semester at the Sitka campus, the student submitted a portfolio of writing assignments completed for courses at Sitka and later revised, a required cover letter briefly describing the portfolio's contents and assessing his writing ability, and an impromptu, timed writing sample. He said Sitka English Professor Bob Mayberry helped him select appropriate materials to submit. This portfolio was evaluated as "No Pass," according to a January 22, 1996 "Notice of Results of the BLA Writing Portfolio Review," by Juneau English Professor and Writing Assessment Coordinator Arthur M. Petersen. A few months later, after enrolling in classes at the Juneau campus, the student submitted a second portfolio containing five new papers, including four written for Juneau classes. This submission was given the same evaluation of "No Pass" in a notice dated April 17, 1996, though one member of the review panel, Professor Petersen noted, judged the new papers to be "definitely

superior to the papers in the original portfolio."

The student said these evaluations were unfair in view of the fact that he had transferred to the Juneau campus after completing 82 "quality" semester credit hours (89 "earned" hours) at the Sitka campus with a cumulative grade point average of 3.14. At Sitka the student completed five English courses of three credits each for which he received grades of *A* and *B*, including the two GER courses in English composition, English 111 (grade: *A*) and English 211, "Intermediate Composition: Modes of Literature" (*B+*). He pointed out that the four papers completed for Juneau campus courses that were judged "No Pass" for the second portfolio submission had received three *As* and a *B* from Juneau faculty.

The student said UAS had misrepresented the quality of education offered on the Sitka campus, since his English courses there did not prepare him adequately to pass the Writing Proficiency Review on the Juneau campus, and since another Sitka course, Spanish 101, "Elementary Spanish," did not prepare him adequately to continue the sequence with Spanish 102 on the Juneau campus. The student said he had not been introduced to the portfolio writing assessment process or to documentation standards for research papers in his Sitka English courses. Responding to Professor Petersen's recommendation that he take English 110 ("Basic Writing") or English 293 ("Portfolio Workshop") in what he considered his senior year, he wrote, "I cannot use lower division credit[s] nor afford them, but I am being asked to pay for remedial classes to learn what I should have already been taught in the previous five English courses, three of which were upper-division." Regarding the Spanish sequence, he wrote, "Once in Juneau I was asked to repeat Spanish 101 or go to morning, night, and tutoring classes. The course material was completely different." The student concluded, "I was not properly taught and will find it hard to compete in the outside world."

The student also described the circumstances surrounding his effort to withdraw from a Juneau campus course, English 293, "Portfolio Workshop," and obtain a refund after he concluded that the instructor was unlikely to prove helpful to him. The student and English Instructor Barbra Moss gave substantially different accounts of what passed between them that led him to stop attending her class while still expecting to receive credit for it. He attended tutoring sessions at the student Learning Center throughout the term but in Ms. Moss's estimation did not meet the agreed-upon requirement that he spend three to four hours each week there. The student produced a written statement from a student tutor saying that his writing skills had improved during the course of their tutoring sessions. According to Ms. Moss's written statement, dated April 29, 1996, when she realized late in the term that the student had not fulfilled what she understood to be their agreement, she gave him an "Incomplete" for the course. The student contended that Ms. Moss's actions typified what he took to be an antagonistic and obstructionist stance

toward him by Juneau English faculty in response to his complaints: "I have complained so much," he wrote, "that I now receive face smirks, negative comments (you again!, we know!, I heard about you!, now what!), and a reputation (. . . we've heard about you!)." He commented, "I feel very discriminated against within this college system."

John Pugh, Dean of the School of Education, Liberal Arts, and Sciences, and the student's academic advisor, decided to approve changing the student's record for that course from *I* (Incomplete) to *W* (Withdrawal), but not to approve a refund of the course fee. This compromise solution only partly satisfied the student, though he commented in his letter of complaint to the Ombudsman, "I must say that John Pugh has been a great help and has done everything possible to resolve the issues at hand."

On May 5, 1996, Professor Petersen wrote the student offering to tutor him in English composition in preparation for his third portfolio submission. "I realize that you have reasons to think that your prior preparation is in part responsible for your writing difficulties," Professor Petersen wrote, "but a combative orientation to the work that you must accomplish will not advance your writing proficiency." He continued,

I believe you need to participate in a concerted, structured way with a faculty member, probably within the structure of a writing class, on your writing. . . . We have been forthright and specific in our assessment of your writing and in recommending what you need to do. You need to take ownership of your problem and be responsible for solving it. Writing is a skill, and one does not learn it by a [sic] means of a little tutoring here and there but rather through long, patient commitment and discipline and with the advantage of editorial responses that faculty members are capable of rendering.

Professor Petersen recommended that the student consider re-enrolling in English 293. "You should consider this," he wrote, "because it is a compromise in what seems to me to be an unreasonable and irresponsible position that will not advance your cause." "An alternative," he added, "would be to work with me." Professor Petersen enclosed a draft document, "The Faculty Member's Role in Writing Assessment at UAS," and invited the student to comment on it. Professor Petersen said he would be distributing the document to all full-time and part-time UAS faculty prior to the beginning of the Fall 1996 term.

The student did not accept the offer of working with Professor Petersen. Instead, he decided to complete his degree at another college outside Alaska.

STANDARDS

According to the Office of the Ombudsman Policies and Procedures manual at 4040, "Definitions," an administrative act or procedure is "unfair" if it violates some principle of justice. Investigation of a complaint that an administrative act was "unfair" examines both the process by which the action was taken (or the decision was made) and the *equitableness* of that decision, that is, the balance between the agency and a complainant in the decision-making process. Procedurally, investigation of a complaint that an administrative act was "unfair" usually will focus on one or more of the following possibilities:

(A) adequate and reasonable notice of the matter was not provided to the complainant;

(B) adequate opportunity has not been given for a person having an interest in a decision to be heard or, if applicable, to conduct an examination or cross-examination to secure full disclosure of the facts;

(C) the decision maker is not without bias or other disqualification;

(D) the decision is not made on the record: the action or decision has been made without consideration of pertinent facts and circumstances, or the testimony, evidence, or point of view of those having a legitimate interest in the decision has been disregarded;

(E) the decision is not supported by reasons or by a statement of evidence relied on; or

(F) the agency is inconsistent in its application of standards or principles in making a decision.

According to the same Ombudsman policy, an administrative act or procedure is "unreasonable" if:

(A) a procedure adopted and followed by an agency managing a program is inconsistent with or fails to achieve the purposes of the program;

(B) a procedure defeats the complainant's valid application for a right or program benefit; or

(C) an act is inconsistent with agency policy and places the complainant at a

disadvantage relative to others.

Other standards consulted include:

Academic Catalog 95-96, University of Alaska Southeast.

"Procedural Guidelines for the Bachelor of Liberal Arts Degree at the University of Alaska Southeast," which includes "Procedures for the First Portfolio Requirement for the BLA Degree at the University of Alaska Southeast." This document is referenced in the Academic Catalog (p. 67).

"The Faculty Member's Role In Writing Assessment at UAS," by Art Petersen, Writing Assessment Coordinator, August 18, 1996.

INVESTIGATION

The student provided his portfolio submissions with Professor Petersen's marks and comments, original papers submitted to History and Sociology classes at the Juneau campus with the instructors' marks and comments, and a variety of other materials and correspondence that documented his complaint. In addition, he said passages in the 1995-96 UAS Academic Catalog appeared to advertise both the programmatic coherence of the three-campus university and the transferability of academic credits between campuses. Specifically, he pointed to the following passages:

Through academic advising, counseling, placement testing, developmental skills courses, tutoring, and commitment to a strong student services organization, the University assists its students and encourages them to achieve their full potential. (from "Mission Statement," p. 9)

Note: Students who are enrolled at one of the three UAS campuses may take classes at any of the UAS campuses and not be considered a transfer student. . . . Credit for coursework successfully completed at any University of Alaska campus toward fulfillment of the general education requirements shall transfer toward fulfillment of the same categories at all other University of Alaska institutions. (from "Admission Requirements for Transfer Students," pp. 11-12)

Mr. Webster reviewed all of the student's materials and discussed his complaints with Dean John Pugh, Professor Art Petersen (who provided additional information about the portfolio writing assessment process at UAS), and Sitka Campus Director Elaine Sunde. Mr. Webster did not

investigate the dispute over whether the student had satisfied the terms of an oral agreement with Juneau English instructor Barbra Moss, since all documentation of this agreement is dated after the fact. Further, this dispute, though perhaps symptomatic of the relationship that developed between the student and Juneau campus English faculty, was incidental to the central issues raised by his complaint. Moreover, while the student viewed his intercampus experience with the Spanish 101/102 sequence as similar to what occurred with his English instruction, the *C* he received in the first course is less compelling evidence of inconsistent grading standards than the contrast between his Sitka and Juneau writing evaluations, which, in any event, are much more fully documented.

Accordingly, the remainder of this discussion will focus on three interrelated aspects of the student's UAS experience: his English grades at Sitka; the relationship between writing in UAS courses and the Writing Proficiency Review; and the student's study loads at Sitka.

The Student's English Grades

The student transferred from Sitka to the Juneau campus after completing five English courses of three credits each for which he received two *As* and three *Bs*, for a cumulative English GPA of 3.46. His UAS academic record shows that these were English 111, "Methods of Written Communication" (grade: *A*); English 211, "Intermediate Composition: Modes of Literature" (*B+*); English 397, "Independent Study: Fiction" (*A*); English 361, "Creative Writing" (*B*); and English 429, "Native American Literature" (*B*). Sitka English Professor Bob Mayberry taught all five of these courses. The lower division (100 and 200 level) English classes were GER courses, while the upper division courses are listed in the UAS Catalog (p. 68) as counting toward a BLA program emphasis in Communications.

Asked about the student's Sitka record and his contention that he had not been introduced to the portfolio writing assessment process or documentation standards for research papers in Professor Mayberry's classes, Elaine Sunde said that until the student raised the issue, she had assumed Professor Mayberry "had already normed this" with other UAS English faculty familiar with portfolio assessment standards. Ms. Sunde, who taught English at Sitka before Professor Mayberry arrived, said she had learned relatively recently he had a pedagogical theory that students assured of an *A* or a *B* are able to rechannel the energy normally consumed by "grade anxiety" toward better learning in and out of the classroom. Ms. Sunde said Professor Mayberry's "automatic grades" ought to have been detected earlier and discouraged.

Dean Pugh said the Sitka campus has had a history of "grade inflation" that he and Ms. Sunde had been working to correct. Some classes, he said, are taught by adjunct faculty who are "paid very little, and can't be expected to

take extra time" to work with students on their writing. On the other hand, Professor Mayberry was a full-time faculty member. "We don't understand how [he] got those grades," Dean Pugh said, but he noted that Professor Mayberry "had a different focus," was interested primarily in drama and creative writing. He speculated that some of the student's high marks at Sitka may have been instances of "badgered grades," but remarked that Professor Mayberry "only gave As and Bs." Dean Pugh acknowledged that the discontinuity between Sitka and Juneau English faculty evaluations of the student's writing was troubling. Ketchikan campus students, he noted, generally do well with the portfolio review. Dean Pugh said UAS administrators had been aware there were problems with the mathematics program at Sitka, but had not been aware of problems with English until this student voiced his concerns. "[He] certainly has a complaint," Dean Pugh said. He noted that Professor Mayberry left the Sitka campus for another position at about the same time the student transferred from Sitka to Juneau. "I've been an advocate for [the student], to get him what he needs," Dean Pugh said, "but he needs to re-evaluate himself and his effort. He needs to work."

Writing Assignments at UAS and Portfolio Assessment

Elaine Sunde said Sitka is reviewing its policy on placement of students in the English composition sequence. In recent years, she said, the Juneau campus has placed a higher percentage of its entering students in English 110, "Basic Writing," than has the Sitka campus. Thus, at Sitka some students have not been receiving the same training in English fundamentals that similarly accomplished students in Juneau have received. Asked if that might tend to disadvantage some Sitka campus students when they transfer to Juneau, Ms. Sunde agreed, though she noted that other Sitka students have done well at the Juneau campus. Placing more students in English 110 should help them succeed, she said, since students at all three campuses participate in a portfolio review process as part of that class. Students who have completed English 110 satisfactorily gain early exposure to the revision strategies available to writers compiling a portfolio. They also learn the standard documentation formats required by the UAS Writing Proficiency Review process.

Dean Pugh said UAS faculty are working toward more consistent evaluation of writing "across the curriculum" in a broad range of academic disciplines. According to Professor Petersen's document, "The Faculty Member's Role in Writing Assessment at UAS," "the incorporation of communication and critical thinking competencies in all classes has become an accreditation standard (per the Northwest Association of Schools and Colleges, Commission on Colleges, 1994)" (p. 1). Elsewhere Professor Petersen states, "Accreditation requirements call for expanding writing assessment to all

degree programs by 1997-98" (p. 6).

Another document provided by Professor Petersen, "Procedural Guidelines for the Bachelor of Liberal Arts Degree at the University of Alaska Southeast" (August 25, 1996), describes "The First Portfolio Requirement for the BLA Degree . . . ("Applicable to all BLA Admissions as of the 1993-94 UAS Catalog"). These guidelines are distributed to UAS students and contain both technical specifications for portfolio submissions-"At minimum, the portfolio must contain twenty typed, double-spaced pages from at least four academic disciplines"-and practical advice: "*do not* put off editing your writing until the last minute." The document explains that "satisfactory grades in prior composition courses do not guarantee retention of appropriate writing ability" and cautions, "It has been found that some instructors' grades do not reflect a paper's overall content. Do not be lulled into feeling confident of a paper that may have received a high or good grade. You are well advised to edit carefully and prepare (or reprepare) each writing in your portfolio" (p. 6).

Professor Petersen said recent statistical analysis showed that 90 percent of 1176 portfolios submitted for evaluation from 1989 through Spring semester 1996 were rated "Pass" (this figure is given twice in "The Faculty Member's Role," pp. 3, 6). The statistical table on page 6 of the same document shows that 70 percent of these submissions were produced as a course requirement for English 110, "Basic Writing," which is not a GER course. The pass rate for the BLA Writing Proficiency Review during this period (the review for which the student submitted two portfolios), was 70 percent (56 out of 80, including 8 portfolios that were resubmitted after failing to pass unconditionally the first time).

The student submitted his first BLA Writing Proficiency Review portfolio in December 1995. He said Professor Mayberry helped him select the papers for this portfolio, which included writing assignments for Geology 105 (a library research paper, "Evolution of the Elephant"), Speech 111 (outline for a speech on "Fat"), Anthropology 211 (a cultural resource site inventory), History 101 (library research paper on "Ramses II"), and English 397 (a short story, "Another Day"). The student did not have the originals of these papers, submitted in 1994 and 1995, with the instructors' marks, but his grades for the five courses were as follows: Geology 105 ("Geological History of Life") A; Speech 111 ("Fundamentals of Oral Communication") B; Anthropology 211 ("Fundamentals of Archaeology") B; History 101 ("Western Civilization") B; and English 397 ("Independent Study, Fiction") A.

The Liberal Arts faculty readers who reviewed the student's first portfolio rated it "No Pass" for several reasons set out in Professor Peterson's notes in the January 22, 1996 Notice of Results. Two of the papers-the speech outline and the site inventory-did not qualify as "expository writing." The paper on

"Evolution of the Elephant" was judged to be excessively derivative, perhaps even plagiarized, and lacking classic expository organization and development. The History paper was considered marginally more expository and original than the Geology paper but poorly organized. All five papers exhibited "the writer's consistent difficulties with idiom, clarity, and awkwardness." "Further," Professor Petersen added, "consistent deviations from standard technical control are also evident in terms of punctuation, sentence fragments, fused sentences, spelling, usage, tense, and pronoun use. These matters lead to the portfolio's Not Passing."

The student submitted his second portfolio in April 1996. It consisted of six papers, including four new papers written for Juneau classes, a brief piece (250 words) titled "Local Industry," written in 1995 for Sociology 201 at Sitka ("Social Problems," a GER course in which he received an A), and a revised version of the short story, "Another Day." The papers written for Juneau History and Sociology classes received three As and one B. These included:

- "A Room of One's Own," submitted for History 102 on April 3, 1996, grade: A-; instructor's comment: "well written."
- "Neighborhood, Family and Work: Influences on the Premarital Behaviors of Adolescent Males," Sociology 301, March 8, 1996, grade: A+; instructor's comment: "Your input into the review is great!"
- "Testosterone and Men's Marriages," Sociology 301, March 29, 1996, grade A; instructor's comment: "good job!"
- "Violence and Injury in Marital Arguments: Risk Patterns and Gender Differences," Sociology 301, April 26, 1996, grade: B.

The History instructor was Thomas Melville, the Sociology instructor Virginia Mulle.

Professor Petersen's April 17, 1996, Notice of Results explained the reasons the student's second portfolio submission was judged "No Pass":

This portfolio was read by five independent BLA faculty portfolio readers, and the recommendation for "no pass" was unanimous. Reviewers did note that the short story was moving and significantly stronger than other papers in terms of voice and sentence structure. One reviewer had seen the original submission of this portfolio and noted major improvement in editing and mechanics in this piece. This reviewer also noted that the new papers submitted were definitely superior to the papers in the original portfolio.

However, the numerous weaknesses still found in this

portfolio by all reviewers show that the writer is not yet prepared to benefit from upper division work despite recent efforts and progress. This finding does not mean that the writer cannot improve further with diligence and perseverance, but s/he must realize that writing progress is a slow process. The writer must be patient and keep working on these skills, probably for many more semesters.

The committee is particularly concerned with the many problems still evident in sentence structure and editing. Frequent sentence fragments and examples of simplistic sentence structure, problems with punctuation, pronoun reference, subject and verb agreement, verb tenses, word usage, and the like show that more intensive study and attention are needed in these areas.

Note: Even if the writing in this portfolio had been judged to be competent (which it was not), the portfolio would not have passed due to incompleteness. There were only three disciplines represented and no real research paper. (emphasis in original)

The Student's Study Loads at Sitka

The student completed 69 "earned" (62 "quality") credit hours of instruction over his first three semesters at the Sitka campus. According to the UAS Academic Catalog, "12 or more semester credit hours will be classified as full-time," and a 15 credit study load is considered "typical" for undergraduates. The catalog states that "Students registering for 19 or more semester credit hours need approval from the student's academic advisor and school dean or campus director" (p. 34).

At the University of Alaska Fairbanks, students are expected (as a rule of thumb) to complete at least two hours of work outside the classroom for each hour a class in an academic subject is scheduled to meet. Thus, a three-credit History, English, or Sociology class meets three class hours each week and theoretically requires a minimum of six hours of work outside class to obtain a passing grade. A "typical" undergraduate study load of 15 "quality" credits would call for at least 30 hours of study each week outside class.

Elaine Sunde noted that there is just one adviser at the Sitka campus but volunteered that student advising there has been "too casual." One reason for this, she said, is that a high percentage of Sitka students take just one or two classes. She agreed, however, that this student had been permitted to enroll in "way too much coursework." She said student advising will be given more attention in the future. The computerized class registration system was

recently programmed to flag courses requiring instructor approval for enrollment, she said, but flagging students enrolling in 19 or more credits had not yet been attempted.

Asked why he took such a heavy academic load, the student said the expense of a college education and his inability to earn a living while enrolled in classes led him to attempt to graduate in three or three and one-half years. He said he had planned to pursue a career as a military officer after graduation, but had recently received the results of the Armed Services Vocational Aptitude Battery examination. "I planned on entering the military as an officer," he wrote, "but to my dismay my test scores were lower than that of high school seniors in all areas. A person would think with almost four years of college and a grade point above 3.0 one could easily pass an ASVAB."

ANALYSIS AND PROPOSED FINDING

UAS staff interviewed all agreed that this student's experience raised troubling questions and had, in fact, led them to review intercampus consistency in matters of grading policy, student placement in writing courses, content and methodology of writing courses, interdisciplinary coordination of writing assignments and evaluation standards, and student advising. Addressing issues raised by this complaint has been, in Ms. Sunde's words, "a learning experience" for UAS.

Under 21 AAC 20.210(b) the Ombudsman evaluates evidence relating to a complaint lodged against a state agency to determine whether the complainant's criticism of the agency's actions is or is not valid, and then accordingly makes a finding that the complaint is "justified" or "not supported." If the Ombudsman finds both that a complaint is "justified" and that the complainant's action or inaction materially affected the agency's action, or if the complaint consists of multiple allegations not deemed equally valid, the complaint may be found "partially justified."

Allegation 1

1) Unfair: staff at the University of Alaska Southeast, Juneau campus, will not give full credit for prerequisite courses taken by complainant at the UAS Sitka campus. The Sitka courses taken are identical in number and title and are equivalent in content to the prerequisite courses at the Juneau campus. This decision delayed complainant's graduation and resulted in additional expense to complainant.

It was proposed that this allegation be found not supported for the following

reasons.

This part of the student's complaint has a certain logical appeal. English 111 and 211 are prerequisite for admission to upper division standing, and he received grades of *A* and *B+* in these courses. Only if the rules have changed, he contended, could his portfolio writings be judged unacceptable. It does seem illogical, on the face of it, that Professor Petersen would recommend that the student take Basic Writing before attempting to submit another portfolio for the Writing Proficiency Review. ("Enroll in English 110 OR English 293-Portfolio Workshop." "Notice of Results of the BLA Writing Portfolio Review," April 17, 1996.) English 110 is less advanced than English 111, just as English 111 is less advanced than English 211. English 110 would be a step backwards for this student. Neither of the courses Professor Petersen recommended counts toward general education or major emphasis requirements for graduation.

However, in view of the student's unfamiliarity with standard research documentation formats, his inadequate grasp of the fundamentals of expository prose, and-most important-his inadequate mastery of basic English writing skills, Professor Petersen's recommendation made good sense. Unfortunately, whatever the reasons for his inability to write sufficiently well to pass the portfolio assessment process, the fact remains that until this student develops writing skills that fall within the normal range for college level writing, he will be unlikely to succeed in upper division studies, particularly in view of his preferred major emphasis in Communications.

Further, while the student's belief that he was "poorly taught" is not necessarily untrue, it does not sort well with his other belief that having completed 82 quality units, including GER English courses, necessarily qualifies him to undertake upper division studies. The latter position borders on the view that education consists in taking the right number of the right courses, that teachers purvey education like a commodity, and that a student's failure to achieve to standard levels of mastery signals that he or she was short changed by inadequate teaching. Setting aside competing theories of education, the student's conclusion is nonetheless difficult to evaluate. No evidence, for example, has come to light indicating that other students who transferred from Sitka to Juneau have had the same experience with the portfolio assessment process, but neither does it appear that university staff have systematically tracked the progress of such students.

A further complication is the issue of this student's heavy study load at Sitka: he enrolled in 69 "earned" (62 "quality") credit hours of instruction over three semesters. According to the UAS Catalog, 12 credits qualifies as a full-time load, and 15 credits is considered "typical" for undergraduates. The catalog states that students are required to obtain approval of an advisor and the dean

or campus director to enroll in 19 or more credits per semester (p. 34). Whether the student was unaware of this requirement or simply chose to ignore it, Sitka staff certainly did not hold him to it. The requirement exists in part to uphold academic standards: students who enroll in too many classes cannot devote adequate study time to all of them. If two hours of outside study time are required for every hour of class time to master course content and practice course skills, satisfactorily completing a 15 "quality" credit study load would require more hours of work than a full-time job. Yet this student was permitted to take 21, 27, and 21 credits during the Spring and Fall 1994 and Spring 1995 semesters respectively. In light of his difficulties with written Standard English, the fact that he maintained a 3.265 GPA during this period at Sitka should be cause for concern.

Yet the student must assume his share of responsibility for having bitten off more, perhaps, than he could profitably chew. In view of the necessarily collaborative nature of higher education, it would be unfair to expect the university to shield students absolutely from the consequences of their choices. The student said the expense of a college education and his inability to earn a living while enrolled in classes led him to attempt an accelerated course of study. That reflects well on his motivation, but it seems unrealistic. Obtaining an education is in fact an extremely labor-intensive endeavor that requires considerable commitment of time and effort. Merely having "taken" a course does not guarantee that a student has mastered the skills and content the course was designed to introduce. Indeed, it might be argued that a successful course should teach a student the skills and content necessary to *continue* learning while employing that knowledge in practical applications outside of the classroom. That, presumably, is what Professor Petersen had in mind when he wrote that "writing progress is a slow process. The writer must be patient and keep working on these skills, probably for many more semesters" (emphasis in original). Unfortunately, this realistic statement is subject to misinterpretation: the student came to view the portfolio assessment requirement as an insurmountable obstacle to his progress toward a Bachelor of Liberal Arts degree at UAS.

Still, it does not seem unreasonable for Juneau Liberal Arts faculty to hold students to a standard that their records show was met by 70 percent of the 80 students who submitted portfolios for the Writing Proficiency Review from the inception of the program in 1989 through Spring term 1996. The BLA writing portfolio assessment process is not merely an academic hoop to be jumped through, but an assignment whose successful completion documents a student's ability to engage successfully in upper division studies leading to the baccalaureate degree. The disappointing results of the Armed Services Vocational Aptitude Battery examination the student wrote about in his letter of complaint suggest that his unhappy experience as a transfer student resulted from a variety of factors rather than from unreasonable academic standards imposed by Professor Petersen and his colleagues at the Juneau

campus.

Finally, the UAS Academic Catalog clearly states (p. 67),

Applicants enter as pre-majors and are considered for full admission to the BLA program after completion of the following requirements:

1. The university's General Education Requirements (GERs) and the BLA program's special requirements with a cumulative 2.5 grade point average,
2. The BLA Writing Proficiency Review, and
3. With an advisor, projection of a course of study approved by the dean.

While the GER English composition courses are prerequisite for admission to the BLA program, then, students must still demonstrate their writing proficiency to gain admission. This requirement is dictated by accreditation standards, is advertised in the catalog, and is applied equally to all BLA aspirants. Students whose writing portfolio is rated "No Pass," "Conditional Pass," or "Pass with Warning" are advised of the reasons for those evaluations and how to go about satisfying the requirement. This is important, since even those who pass this review must also pass a Final Portfolio Requirement prior to their semester of graduation (BLA "Guidelines," pp. 3, 8). Each of the student's two portfolio notices provided a comprehensive enumeration of reasons the portfolio did not pass. In addition, Professor Petersen provided the student with detailed corrections of the papers in both portfolios.

For all of these reasons, then, it was not unfair of Juneau faculty to delay this student's admission to the BLA program pending his satisfactory completion of the Writing Proficiency Review. The problem was not that they failed to give him full credit for his GER English courses, but that he failed to satisfy one of the other requirements for admission to the program.

Allegation 2

2) Unreasonable: university faculty failed to observe consistent standards in evaluating the complainant's writing assignments.

It was proposed that this allegation be found justified.

There will always be some instructors who grade higher on average than others. If enough instructors do this, the result is "grade inflation." Common

sense suggests that as standards decline, academic performance will decline. Certainly, inflated grades from one instructor increase the likelihood that some students will be unprepared to meet standards reflected in the distribution of grades among the student body as a whole. In this student's case, Professor Mayberry appears to have held him to a much lower standard than Professor Petersen and his colleagues in Juneau expect students will encounter in GER courses like English 111 and English 211.

Indeed, the level of writing in this student's two portfolio submissions indicates rather clearly that his grades of *A* ("outstanding") and *B+* ("above average") in English 111 and 211 at the Sitka campus did not accurately reflect the degree to which he had mastered the fundamentals of college level English composition. The document Professor Petersen and his colleagues wrote for distribution to UAS faculty, "The Faculty Member's Role In Writing Assessment at UAS," contains the following statement, boxed for emphasis:

Probably there is no worse betrayal of students than not to bring to their attention writing that has difficulties, and then even worse, of assigning it a high or good score if it does not measure up to a high standard. Not telling student writers the truth gives them a false sense of their writing ability and sets them up for a rude awakening in some other class and in the portfolio review. Not responding adequately also cheats students of a quality education in the class at hand and thereafter. (p. 5, emphasis in original)

The record shows that "betrayal" of this sort happened to this student several times at both the Sitka and Juneau campuses of UAS. Whether his experience is common for a UAS student is unclear, but in this instance, at least, a student was given wholly different evaluations of the same papers by UAS English, Sociology, and History instructors. The differences are apparent not only in the course and assignment grades, but in the written comments on the student's assignments. Papers that Juneau instructors graded *A-* ("well written"), *A+* ("Your input into the review is great!"), *A* ("good job!"), and *B* were judged incompetent by portfolio reviewers. The clean copies of these papers that Professor Petersen marked are any student's English class nightmare, profusely annotated with error codes and critical comments. The point is not that Professor Petersen's corrections and comments were necessarily hypercritical-his overall evaluation was shared by other UAS faculty-but simply that *this student's portfolio submissions clearly were evaluated according to much more rigorous standards than were applied to his regular class writing assignments by faculty in several academic disciplines both in Sitka and in Juneau.*

As a result, he encountered an unreasonable situation. He submitted his best work, selected with the advice of an English Professor who had awarded him

grades of *A* and *B+* in GER English courses, and failed the review. He submitted a second selection of work, including four papers judged outstanding or above average by Juneau faculty, and failed again. "How could this happen?" he asked. It was a good question. Who was right about his level of achievement? The results of the military aptitude examination appear to have confirmed for him that his UAS instructors' evaluations of his academic progress were inaccurate.

Faced with this problem, UAS administrators and faculty were perhaps understandably short of satisfactory answers to this student's persistent questions. The dispute between English Instructor Barbra Moss and the student over the nature of their agreement on the student's attendance requirements for English 293, and the administrative wrangling that ensued, ought not to obscure the very real inconsistencies his experience brought to light, not to mention the distressing impact long-delayed corrective action necessarily has had on his academic career. Indeed, the practical consequences of this unhappy episode have been far more painful for the student than for the institution and its employees. Professor Petersen urged the student to transcend feelings of victimization and "take ownership of [his] problem." Undoubtedly, that is what he will have to do to progress, but the Writing Proficiency Review is a gate through which BLA aspirants must pass: UAS staff might perhaps have done more to help this student fashion a key to that gate.

Efforts by UAS staff to remedy systemic deficiencies in the writing assessment process and in the placement of students in the composition sequence, Professor Petersen's offer to give the student personalized tutoring—these actions are of course commendable. It is difficult, however, not to share the student's view that things ought not to have happened this way. He, after all, is the one who was left to pick up the pieces. Again, this is not to suggest that he had no responsibility for his own education. However, had Sitka faculty graded his work appropriately and had Sitka staff effectively monitored his study load, one would like to think he would have gained a more accurate impression of his English writing and Spanish language skills, and perhaps would have worked to acquire greater mastery of the skills and content presented in his classes at UAS.

Stepping back from the specifics of this complaint to view its implications for the university, two things might be said. First, and most obviously, despite a tendency by university staff to view this student's experience as exceptional, it seems unlikely that only one student has been affected by what certainly appears to be a systemic, cross-disciplinary disposition to award inflated grades on writing assignments. The fact that other students have not yet complained of inconsistent standards is no guarantee that this was an isolated case.

Second, and following directly from that consideration, this student's complaint raises consumer issues. He stressed that the university has an obligation to maintain consistent standards throughout the UAS system, as common sense suggests and as, indeed, the UAS Academic Catalog appears to advertise. Students paying to enroll in classes at any UAS campus ought to feel assured that services and program requirements meet system-wide standards implied by the university's accreditation.

In this case, it seems clear from the record that this student was to some degree victimized by irregular quality control in Sitka and in Juneau. Inconsistent grading, inconsistent writing assessment standards, inconsistent placement procedures, inconsistent enforcement of study load and program requirements, inconsistent curricular content-such irregularities run counter to sound education policy and tend to undermine the purposes of a university.

In a word, it was *unreasonable* that this student was led to believe, as any student might be led by As and Bs, that his writing skills were better-much better-than Juneau English faculty subsequently judged them to be.

In summary, it was proposed that Allegation 1 be found not supported, that Allegation 2 be found justified, and that the complaint taken as a whole be found partially justified.

CLOSING OBSERVATIONS

By statute the Ombudsman investigates "to find an appropriate remedy." AS 24.55.150(b). The issue raised by this complaint initially appeared to this office to be worthy of investigation because it suggested that UAS campuses had not adequately coordinated their policies and standards. It appeared that significant harm to the public might result if this were true.

The rationale for the writing portfolio assessment process is to determine whether students are ready for upper division research assignments requiring critical reading and analytical writing. Lower division coursework presumably has the objective of preparing students to meet these requirements. If writing assignments are commonly evaluated according to different standards in different disciplines, as the BLA "Guidelines" handout suggests (p. 7), students ought to be advised of the differences, particularly in view of the cross-disciplinary requirements of the expanding UAS writing assessment program.

There is no real remedy for the "justified" portion of this student's complaint. In his view, the damage-wasted time, effort, and expense-has been done. However, soon after this complaint was filed, UAS officials moved in several areas to remedy potential systemic problems highlighted by this student's experience. Professor Petersen said (as he wrote to the student in a letter dated May 5, 1996) that all full-time and part-time UAS faculty have since been advised of the BLA Writing Proficiency Review process and the requirements imposed on students for passing the review. In addition, Professor Peterson said staff had discussed adopting portfolio grading in core English courses at all three campuses. In this, UAS appears to be following a nationwide trend toward portfolio assessment in writing classes.

This student's experience with the BLA portfolio review process brought to light inconsistent standards within UAS. The university's response has been to increase scrutiny of instructors' grades and students' study loads and to work toward more consistent placement of writing students. In addition, staff have taken this opportunity to make sure that all faculty are aware of the portfolio writing assessment process. In short, UAS administrators appear to have taken a variety of steps to achieve something approaching the consistent policies and uniform standards the student argued the UAS Catalog advertises. No doubt, university administrators and faculty will monitor the results of their efforts to regularize the educational program at UAS and make adjustments as needed. Moreover, the integrity of the academic program at UAS is subject to periodic accreditation review by the Northwest Association of Schools and Colleges. For these reasons, no formal Ombudsman recommendations accompanied this report.

AGENCY RESPONSE AND FINDING OF RECORD

On September 16, 1997, UAS Chancellor Marshall Lind responded to the preliminary report issued by Ombudsman Stuart C. Hall on August 21, 1997: "UAS does not wish to provide additional information or request modifications to this report." Accordingly, Acting Ombudsman Maria C. Moya closed this complaint as "fully investigated," with the finding of record for Allegation 1 *not supported*; the finding of record for Allegation 2 *justified*; and the finding of record for the complaint taken as a whole, *partially justified*.