

Ombuds Annual Report (2015-2016)

I. Background Information

Appointment of a Graduate Student Ombudsman at USC

On July 1, 2012, the new office of Graduate Student Ombudsman was created by Provost Amiridis. Assistant Dean Dale Moore, former Director of Graduate Admissions, was appointed as the first Graduate Student Ombudsman. The Graduate Student Ombudsman deals with problems and concerns outside formal channels that may include grievances, appeals, or petitions.

In April 2013, Dale Moore completed the International Ombudsman Association's Organizational Ombudsman Knowledge and Skills: Working with Visitors and Respondents. The Graduate Student Ombudsman adheres to the Code of Ethics and the Standards of Practice of the International Ombudsman Association (IOA) and serves as a confidential, neutral, informal and independent resource for graduate student concerns and conflicts.

Dale is a member in good standing of the International Ombudsman Association (IOA). The Graduate Student Ombudsman adheres to the *Code of Ethics* and the *Standards of Practice* of the *International Ombudsman Association* and serves as a confidential, neutral, informal and independent resource for graduate student concerns and conflicts.

A website for the Graduate Student Ombudsman is located at this URL: <http://gradschool.sc.edu/students/ombs.asp> and provides information about the office, the ombudsman, annual reports, the *IOA Standards of Practice* and the *IOA Code of Ethics* as well as links to other ombuds-related resources.

International Ombudsman Association

The International Ombudsman Association (IOA) was formed in July 2005 following the merger of the University and College Ombuds Association (UCOA) and The Ombudsman Association (TOA). The Association supports organizational Ombudsmen worldwide working in corporations, universities, non-profit organizations, government entities and non-governmental organizations. IOA is the largest international association of professional organizational Ombudsmen practitioners in the world. About a third of the total membership belongs to the academic sector.

The IOA is dedicated to excellence in the practice of Ombudsman work. The IOA Code of Ethics provides a common set of professional ethical principles to which members adhere in their organizational Ombudsman practice. Based on the traditions and values of Ombudsman practice, the Code of Ethics reflects a commitment to promote ethical conduct in the performance of the Ombudsman role and to maintain the integrity of the Ombudsman profession.

II. Ethical Principles of the International Ombudsman Association

Confidentiality

The Ombudsman holds all communications with those seeking assistance in strict confidence, and does not disclose confidential communications unless given permission to do so. The only exception

to this privilege of confidentiality is when such disclosure is required by law or where there appears to be imminent risk of serious harm.

Neutrality and Impartiality

The Ombudsman, as a designated neutral, remains unaligned and impartial. The Ombudsman does not engage in any situation which could create a conflict of interest.

Informality

The Ombudsman, as an informal resource, does not participate in any formal adjudicative or administrative procedure related to concerns brought to his/her attention.

Independence

The Ombudsman is independent in structure, function, and appearance to the highest degree possible within the organization.

III. Standards of Practice and Code of Ethics of the International Ombudsman Association

The IOA Standards of Practice are based upon and derived from the ethical principles stated in the IOA Code of Ethics.

Links to these documents are located here:

https://www.ombudsassociation.org/IOA_Main/media/SiteFiles/IOA_Standards_of_Practice_Oct09.pdf https://www.ombudsassociation.org/IOA_Main/media/SiteFiles/Code_Ethics_1-07.pdf

IV. Activities of the Graduate Student Ombudsman (2015-2016)

The Graduate Student Ombudsman attended the 11th Annual IOA Conference April 10-13 in Seattle.

The Ombuds met with various campus groups to discuss the role of the Graduate Student Ombudsman, including a presentation to international students attending the ITA workshop and assessment.

Visitors and Topics of Concern (2015-2016)

During the period of this report (July 1, 2015 to June 30, 2016) the Graduate Student Ombudsman met with 290 visitors, a 44.3% increase over the previous year. Visits involved listening to visitor concerns, offering information about relevant University policies and procedures, clarifying issues, identifying and evaluating a range of options for resolving their problem, gathering information, offering referrals to other resources, or working collaboratively between those involved in a dispute to informally reconcile differences. The Ombuds tracks issues, identifies trends, and makes appropriate recommendations for departmental, college, or institutional change.

In order to preserve the confidentiality of visitors, the Ombuds creates or maintains no records related to the identity of the individual student including their gender, race, department, college or school. The only information retained from contacts by student visitors with the Ombuds is that regarding the nature of the issue discussed.

Uniform Reporting Categories – student concerns in each category (2015-2016)

(1) Compensation & Benefits - *Questions, concerns, issues or inquiries about the equity, appropriateness and competitiveness of employee compensation, benefits and other benefit programs.* 26 visitors in this category.

(2) Evaluative Relationships - *Questions, concerns, issues or inquiries arising between people in evaluative relationships (i.e. senior faculty-junior faculty, program director-faculty, chair-faculty, dean-faculty, faculty-student).* 52 visitors in this category.

(3) Peer and Colleague Relationships - *Questions, concerns, issues or inquiries involving peers or colleagues who do not have a direct supervisory relationship (e.g., two faculty members within the same department or conflict involving faculty members of the same college or unit).* 25 visitors in this category.

(4) Career Progression and Development - *Questions, concerns, issues or inquiries about administrative processes and decisions regarding entering and leaving a job, or what it entails, (i.e., recruitment, nature and place of assignment, job security, and separation).* 38 visitors in this category.

(5) Legal, Regulatory, Financial and Compliance - *Questions, concerns, issues or inquiries that may create a legal risk (financial, sanction etc.) for the organization or its members if not addressed, including issues related to waste, fraud or abuse.* 27 visitors in this category.

(6) Safety, Health, and Physical Environment - *Questions, concerns, issues or inquiries about Safety, Health and Infrastructure-related issues.* 36 visitors in this category.

(7) Services/Administrative Issues - *Questions, concerns, issues or inquiries about services or administrative offices.* 70 visitors in this category.

(8) Organizational, Strategic, and Mission Related - *Questions, concerns, issues or inquiries that relate to the whole or some part of an organization.* 2 visitors in this category.

(9) Values, Ethics, and Standards - *Questions, concerns, issues or inquiries about the fairness of organizational values, ethics, and/or standards, the application of related policies and/or procedures, or the need for creation or revision of policies, and/or standards.* 14 visitors in this category.

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Reporting Categories	2015-2016	%
1. Compensation and Benefits	26	9.0
2. Evaluative Relationships	52	17.9
3. Peer and Colleague Relationships	25	8.6
4. Career Progression and Development	38	13.1
5. Legal, Regulatory, Financial, and Compliance	27	9.3
6. Safety, Health, and Physical Environment	36	12.4
7. Services/Administrative Issues	70	24.1
8. Organizational, Strategic, and Mission Related	2	.1
9. Values, Ethics, and Standards	14	4.8
Totals	290	99.30

Final Comments

Visitor concerns representing patterns or trends continue to cluster around faculty/student conflicts, issues with legal implications including harassment, discrimination, and intellectual property, the perceived fairness of policies, practices, and standards, and service/administrative issues. 2015-2016 experienced significant increases in visitor concerns involving compensation and benefits; peer and colleague relationships; career progression and development; safety, health, and physical environment; and services/administrative issues. By contrast, there were significant declines in the number of concerns about legal, regulatory, financial, and compliance; safety, health, and physical environment; organizational, strategic, and mission related; and values, ethics, and standards. Most conflicts were reconciled informally, but some elevated to formal processes, including external agencies.

Notable changes in visitor concerns over the year ending on June 30, 2016 included:

(1) Compensation and Benefits	422% increase (5 to 26)
(2) Evaluative Relationships	73% increase (30 to 52)
(3) Peer and Colleague Relationships	47% increase (17 to 25)
(4) Career Progression and Development	192% increase (13 to 38)
(5) Legal, Regulatory, Financial, and Compliance	35.7% decrease (42 to 27))
(6) Safety, Health, and Physical Environment	56.5% increase (23 to 36)
(7) Services/Administrative Issues	75% increase (40 to 70)
(8) Organizational, Strategic, and Mission Related	60% decrease (5 to 2)
(9) Values, Ethics, and Standards	46% decrease (26 to 14)

The number of visitors increased by 44.3% (201 to 290) over the 2014-2015 reporting year. It may be premature to consider these increases a part of an emerging trend, if there significant increases in the number of bullying and discrimination complaints (all referred to EOP); funding-related issues that created stress inhibiting academic and research progress; misinformation or misunderstandings caused by the “graying” of faculty, staff, and administration creating unusually high turnover rates and longer learning curves for their replacements; and “growing pains” experienced by new online programs unable to manage the growth in enrollments. It will be interesting to see if the coming year supports what appear to be emerging trends in these areas.

Ombuds success continues to benefit from the cooperation and support of faculty and administrative leaders willing to listen to visitor concerns and work with all stakeholders to find a fair and just resolution to conflicts. The Ombuds recognizes and appreciates their willingness to support this work without violating the independence, neutrality, informality, or confidentiality of the ombuds process.