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Academic Position Description

Generic Academic Ombudsman Position Description

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NOTE: The contents of this document are intended for general informational purposes only. A competent professional should be consulted for advice on any specific application of the information contained herein.

Position Summary

The academic ombudsman¹ is a designated neutral or impartial dispute resolution practitioner whose major function is to provide confidential and informal assistance to constituents of the university's community, which includes students, staff, faculty, and/or administrators. Serving as a designated neutral, the ombudsman is neither an advocate for any individual nor the organization, but rather is an advocate for fairness, who acts as a source of information and referral, and aids in answering individual's questions, and assists in the resolution of concerns and critical situations. In considering any given instance or concern, the point of view of all parties that might be involved are taken into account. This office supplements, but does not replace, the University's existing resources for formal conflict resolution.

Reporting

The ombudsman function is independent of existing administrative structures and reports directly to the president or other senior leader in the administration. The ombudsman does not accept notice on behalf of the university. While maintaining confidentiality of communications with inquirers², the ombudsman may prepare a periodic report to the university community. Based on anonymous aggregate data, this report discusses trends in the reporting of issues or concerns, identifies patterns or problem areas in existing policies and practices, may recommend revisions

and improvements, and may assess the climate of the campus.

Critical Skills and Characteristics

Communication and Problem-Solving Skills. An ombudsman must have outstanding communication skills and be able to communicate effectively with individuals at all levels of the organization, as well as, with people of all cultures. It is imperative that the ombudsman has excellent problem-solving skills and be able to gather information, analyze it and, as necessary, help the inquirer develop appropriate options and actions.

Decision-Making/Strategic Thinking Skills. An ombudsman must be aware of how all decisions might impact the inquirer, as well as other stakeholders and the university/college. An ombudsman must know how to proceed with issues, and help the inquirer assess who should be involved and at what stage.

Conflict Resolution Skills. An essential element of the ombudsman's role is that of facilitating the resolution of conflict between parties. It is important that the ombudsman have a thorough understanding of what leads to conflict, the nature of conflict, and methods of resolution. The skills used to assist inquirers to resolve their conflicts include:

- helping people learn how to deal with the matter directly if they wish to do so
- serving as a facilitator between the parties via shuttle diplomacy
- informally bringing the parties together and serving as a facilitator or mediator approaching the conflict issue generically within the larger environment (especially when the inquirer is afraid of retaliation)
- influencing systems change which could obviate the individual problem

The ombudsman may also have the ability to help the inquirer determine which conflict resolution method would be appropriate for the specific situation.

Organizational Knowledge and Networking Skills. An ombudsman must be knowledgeable about the college or university, its structure, culture, policies, and practices. The ombudsman must have excellent networking skills, understand and participate in collaboration with others, and be able to establish and maintain broad contacts throughout the organization.

Sensitivity to Diversity Issues. The ombudsman must be sensitive to dealing with individuals from a wide variety of backgrounds and cultures. The ombudsman must be open, objective, and must seek to understand issues from multiple perspectives. The ombudsman should be innovative in developing options that are responsive to differing needs.

Composure and Presentation Skills. An ombudsman should maintain a professional demeanor, should have strong presentation skills, and should be able to organize and communicate information to groups of varying size and hierarchical levels in the organization.

Integrity. An ombudsman should have a reputation for integrity and for dealing fairly, effectively and in a timely fashion with all constituents.

An ombudsman office is based on the assurance of confidentiality to the extent to which the law allows. Therefore the ombudsman must keep information confidential in accordance with the Code of Ethics and Standards of Practice of the International Ombudsman Association.

An ombudsman should not be risk-averse and should understand that this position may, on

occasion, challenge even the highest levels of the administration in an effort to foster fair and just practices.

Accountabilities

Dispute Resolution, Consultation, and Referral

- Provide impartial and confidential conflict resolution services to members of the campus community who are aggrieved or concerned about an issue.
- Remain independent, neutral and impartial, and exercise good judgment.
- Assist inquirers in obtaining and providing relevant information regarding university policies and procedures.
- Assist inquirers in clarifying issues and generating options for resolution.
- Facilitate the inquirer's assessment of the pros and cons of possible options.
- If direct action by the ombudsman is an appropriate option, obtain the inquirer's agreement and permission before proceeding.
- If necessary, and while maintaining confidentiality, engage in informal information gathering in order to better understand an issue from all perspectives.
- Consult with department managers and appropriate individuals to develop cooperative strategies for resolving concerns and complaints.
- With the inquirer's permission, consult with all parties to clarify and analyze problems, focus discussions, and develop a mutually-satisfactory process for resolution.
- When appropriate, facilitate group meetings, use shuttle diplomacy, or negotiation skills to facilitate communication among parties in conflict.
- Encourage flexible administrative practices to maximize the institution's ability to meet the needs of all members of the campus community equitably.
- Whenever possible and appropriate, provide inquirer with referrals to other resources, such as Human Resources, the Employee Assistance Program, Peer Counseling, Campus Health Center, Campus Safety, and the like.
- Follow up with inquirers as appropriate to determine outcome and further need of assistance.

Policy Analysis and Feedback

- Serve as a campus resource for officials in formulating or modifying policy and procedures, raising issues that might surface as a result of a gap between the stated goals of the institution and actual practice.
- Act as a liaison between individuals or groups and the campus administrative structure, serving as a communicator or informal facilitator, as appropriate, and providing upward feedback.
- Function as a sensor within the campus community to identify problems or trends that affect the entire campus or significant parts of the community; if appropriate, recommend creative ways to address these concerns.
- Provide early warning of new areas of organizational concern, upward feedback, critical analysis of systemic needs for improvement, and make systems change recommendations.

Campus Community Outreach and Education

- The ombudsman is responsible for ongoing education and communication about the office's role to all potential inquirers as well as to campus leadership.
- Design and conduct training programs for the campus community in dispute/conflict resolution, negotiation skills and theory, civility, and related topics.

Establish/Maintain Office of the Ombudsman

- Supervise office staff, as necessary. Formulate, manage and monitor the overall goals, direction, programs and budget of the office.
- Ensure that the integrity of the office is maintained by all office staff through independence, fair process, neutrality, impartiality, confidentiality, and timely attention to the resolution of issues while treating people with dignity and respect.

Professional Membership and Ongoing Development

- Maintain active membership in relevant professional associations, such as the International Ombudsman Association, in order to stay on the leading edge of critical ombudsman issues, such as confidentiality and privilege.
- Ombudsman skills should be continually enhanced through training courses offered by these professional associations.

Education and Work Experience

The academic ombudsman should have a Bachelor's degree; however, an advanced degree combined with relevant dispute resolution training or ombudsman experience is preferred. Experience working with people of diverse backgrounds and cultures is also desired.

¹ The term ombudsman is used to communicate to the widest possible community and is not intended to discourage others from using alternatives. IOA respectfully acknowledges that many practitioners use alternative forms of this word, such as ombuds or ombudsperson.

² The term inquirer is also used to communicate to the widest possible community. Alternatives such as visitor or caller are frequently used.

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