



CAL POLY

Academic Senate

Ombuds Office Staffing and Resource Structures: A Report to the Provost's Office from the Academic Senate Diversity Committee June 2023

In March 2023, the Academic Senate Diversity Committee (ASDC) was asked by the Provost's Office to report on staffing and resource structures for Ombuds offices in California and nationally. During spring quarter, ASDC contacted 75 colleges and universities via email and received information from 36 college or university Ombuds offices via email or zoom meeting. All California State University (CSU) and University of California (UC) campuses were contacted, along with other, mostly public universities of roughly similar size. The International Ombuds Association's (IOA) [Standards of Practice](#) is referenced several times in this document; please review the document for further information. The following is the aggregated and distilled information ASDC received from Ombuds offices around the country.

Staffing Structure

Almost all colleges and universities in our sample house one Ombuds office that serve one or more constituencies instead of having separate Ombuds offices serving separate constituencies (e.g., one office for undergraduate students, another separate office for graduate students and faculty). Several Ombuds explicitly recommend one central office to house all Ombuds at a university. Some Ombuds offices are made up of a sole practitioner, while others have multiple practitioners (with some serving in a part time position) and several offices have staff support to assist with scheduling, outreach, and other communications. Staff support is seen as not necessary, but helpful for keeping the office well-utilized (outreach) and efficient (scheduling, other communications). Beyond outreach and mediation, many Ombuds offices are asked to create and deliver presentations to various campus entities that focus on conflict resolution and effective communication. Staffing issues are mainly due to budgetary constraints and working at or beyond an office's capacity.

Many Ombuds elicit standards of practice to explain where the Ombuds office is housed in the hierarchy of their university. Almost all Ombuds offices report directly to the President, Chancellor or Provost. Some report that it is essential to do so, as it promotes independence of the office (which is a standard of practice) and allows the Ombuds to have the ear of an administrator that could lead to change. As part of the function and benefit of having an Ombuds office is for Ombuds to report on trends they are noticing around the university or with specific university entities. Reporting these trends to an administrator such as Provost, Chancellor or President would be more productive than reporting to an administrator with less decision-making authority.

Considerations brought up for *who* should serve in an Ombuds role or Ombuds office relate to real or perceived conflicts of interest (standard of practice). People serving dual roles at a university

(e.g., half time Ombuds, half time staff member) are seen as potentially problematic since they could have a conflict of interest. However, many Ombuds report that their current staffing structure includes people serving part-time in the Ombuds office, and part-time elsewhere on campus (e.g., serving as faculty). Further, people hired for these positions should take the standards of practice (i.e., independence, confidentiality, informality, impartiality) seriously and follow them to the best of their ability.

For Ombuds offices that employ more than one practitioner, many Ombuds are generalists, meaning they could serve any constituency on campus. However, some offices assign Ombuds to certain constituencies, depending on their background and expertise. For example, a recently retired faculty member might serve part-time as the faculty Ombuds. There are specific strengths and drawbacks noted to each approach; Ombuds serving based on their background and expertise may garner more trust within the constituency they are serving (and therefore will be readily utilized), but there may be issues with the appearance of being an advocate for that specific constituency, instead of a neutral party, and trends that may be happening around the university would be less likely to be noticed if Ombuds are siloed to specific constituencies. Regardless, proper training, adherence to the profession's standards of practice, and ongoing professional development are seen as essential to a quality, productive Ombuds office.

Resource Structure

Most Ombuds report that their funding comes from the President's office, Provost's Office, or their university's General Fund. Some Ombuds explain that this type of funding is appropriate and more advantageous than other types of funding (one-time or temporary funding), as this funding is more secure and less dependent on annual shifts in budget. Several Ombuds offices are funded through multiple university accounts. Ombuds office budgets are straightforward; almost all funds are utilized for staff pay, including both Ombuds and staff support. Other funding is used for confidential paper shredding (standard of practice), and software (data management, scheduling software) and computers.

Recommendations for Cal Poly

- Expand the Ombuds office to serve faculty and staff as well as students. Many Ombuds report that their biggest constituency is faculty, with staff utilizing Ombuds services in moderate numbers; thus, there is likely an unmet need for Ombuds services at Cal Poly.
- Follow IOA Standards of Practice to the best of our ability at Cal Poly, which includes the Ombuds role being *fully* confidential to the extent allowed by law. An Executive Order from the CSU Chancellor's Office does not currently make that possible, but this should be revisited if circumstances at the Chancellor's Office change. Based on conversations with Ombuds around the nation, the consequences of not being fully confidential include: Ombuds are not able to be certified by the IOA; not fully following standards of practice of the profession; and potential reduced feelings of trust that constituents have in the Ombuds office.
- Hire additional staff and support as needed based on demand. This includes both Ombuds, but also potentially support staff to assist with scheduling and university outreach. Outreach and rapport-building will be very important for successful expansion to serve faculty and staff. Note that rapport and trust will take time, and demand for faculty and staff Ombuds services will likely increase over time.

- Continue the Ombuds office reporting to the highest authority possible within the university (e.g., President, Provost) as to reduce undue influence (real or perceived) and increase the utility and independence of the Ombuds office.

If you have further questions, please do not hesitate to reach out. The expansion of our Ombuds office is an exciting prospect that could serve as an invaluable resource to constituents, as well as the university at large.

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