

University of Tennessee Ombuds Office Report
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Faculty Ombudsperson Report

The past 3 years a total of about 38 Faculty, Department heads, and Deans sought services from the faculty ombudsman, though the numbers of persons involved exceeded this number since the conflicts brought by these persons included many others, and in a few cases a sizeable portion of, or an entire, department. These cases included complaints such as:

- Conflict between a faculty member and a department head over the faculty member not getting a promised course;
- Faculty complaints about annual evaluations (examples: ratings were too low; raise received was too low, or no merit raise was given when it was deserved);
- Disputes between department heads and faculty over what constitutes appropriate levels and types of scholarship;
- Complaints a department head changed criteria for meeting goals between previous year's and most recent annual evaluations;
- Complaint of possible gender based discrimination by department head;
- Complaints that department head retaliated against faculty member in response to faculty member's complaints;
- Faculty disagreements over use of space;
- Request for a mediation between a senior faculty member and her/his department head over disagreement about the faculty member's teaching and research expectations;
- A complaint by a faculty member that he or she was being required by her/his department head to do something that violated an agreement with an external funding source;

- A complaint by a female faculty member that she was being bullied by a male faculty member and that this was based in part on her gender and ethnicity;
- A complaint by both a junior faculty member and her/his department head that another senior faculty member was accusing them of gender based discrimination in email exchanges;
- Conflict in a department associated with a change in department head;
- Multiple complaints by female faculty members that they were being bullied by male faculty members in their departments;
- A complaint by a junior faculty member that he or she was not being evaluated on appropriate criteria during the most recent annual evaluation.
- Disputes between department heads and faculty over expected professional behavior;
- Conflicts between faculty and staff persons;
- Problems between faculty and staff associated with a lack of clarity over expected roles and responsibilities; and
- Long term conflicts between faculty members, some severe with durations up to nearly 20 years.

Recommendations based on our experience to date.

1. One recommendation we have is the creation of a central location for all three ombuds programs, that for faculty, staff, and students. This would include a permanent location in which meeting with faculty, staff, and students involved in ombuds relevant cases can meet and try to work out the issues they complain about. It is common that conflicts brought to our attention involve not just faculty alone, staff alone, or students alone. Many involve persons from two or even all three of these categories. It is common that

conflicts brought to our attention involve not just faculty alone, staff alone, or students alone. Many involve persons from two or even all three of these categories. Having an integration of the 3 programs could facilitate cross program collaboration when appropriate. This could help better resolve conflicts involving persons from more than one these different categories.

2. A second recommendation is finding a way to build a working relationship between the ombuds programs and HR.
3. Work to develop a clear definition of “bullying”.
4. A final recommendation concerns the training of department heads in conflict identification and conflict resolution. Our recommendation is that the persons doing this training do so from a human relationship perspective. All conflicts to some degree or other involve interpersonal relationships and these issues need to be attended to. Training conflict resolution models that focus on legalistic thinking, or on identifying who is right and who is wrong fail to address these interpersonal relationship dimensions of conflict, often to the detriment of the conflict resolution process.

Staff Ombudsperson’s Report

Staff Ombuds cases averaged 15- 20 per year, each with a varying number of employees involved. These cases often included faculty and administrative personnel as well as mid-level staff members. Actual numbers would be higher if a fear of retaliation for speaking out wasn’t so prevalent. Complaints typically centered around the following issues:

- lack of or miscommunications
- different perspectives around performance reviews (both in process and/or content)
- beliefs there are or have been behavioral and/or policy infractions

- differences in interpersonal styles of thinking, problem-solving and communicating
- unclear job descriptions and/or expectations
- management of systemic and departmental change/reorganizations
- a sense of individual powerlessness and lack of organizational support
- general lack of skills and support for dealing with conflict collaboratively

Moving forward, I believe Ombudspersons can be even more effective if the program is better integrated into the UT system at all levels. Components of this would include:

- establishing an Ombuds Office which would provide appropriate spaces for holding Faculty, Staff and Student Ombuds meetings
- providing limited staffed office hours for an Ombuds Office
- increasing cross-program collaboration between Faculty and Staff Ombuds Programs and developing such relationships with the new Student Ombuds Program
- raising the visibility of Ombudspersons and their functions through fliers/brochures, articles in campus newspaper, signs around campus, etc.
- including information about the Ombuds option for dealing with conflict in new employee orientations, continuing education trainings, faculty senate work, etc.
- developing a collaborative relationship with human resources and employee relations departments
- providing funding for Ombudspersons' membership and training in the International Ombuds Association
- requiring training in collaborative conflict management, perspective-taking, systems theory and interpersonal relationships for supervisors at all levels