University Ombudsman at USC

In August 2023, Robin DiPietro, a professor in the School of Hospitality and Tourism Management became the Faculty Ombuds for University of South Carolina. She joined the International Ombudsman Association during fall 2023. The University 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 faculty concerns and conflicts.

A website for the University ombudsman was launched in September of 2006 and continues at http://www.sc.edu/ombuds/ providing information about the office, the ombudsman, annual reports, the IOA Standards of Practice and Code of Ethics, as well as links to other ombuds-related resources.

In December 2023, a staff ombuds position was formally created at the University of South Carolina and information about this office can be found at the website: https://sc.edu/about/offices_and_divisions/staff-ombuds-office/index.php

International Ombudsman Association

The International Ombudsman Association (IOA) was officially formed in July 2005 following the merger of the University and College Ombuds Association (UCOA) and The Ombudsman Association (TOA). IOA is the largest international association of professional organizational Ombudsmen practitioners in the world.

The Association supports organizational Ombudsmen worldwide working in corporations, universities, non-profit organizations, government entities and non-governmental organizations. IOA offers a full roster of professional training and education programs for the practicing ombudsman professional and those interested in learning more about the profession. In addition, the association works to support and promote the profession through strategic partnerships and communication with government agencies and other professional organizations as appropriate.

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.

IOA Ethical Principles

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 where there appears to be imminent risk of serious harm to the individual or other individuals.

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.

IOA Standards of Practice and IOA Code of Ethics

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

https://www.ombudsassociation.org/standards-of-practice-code-of-ethics

2025-2026 Activities

The University ombudsman did further Continuing Education and further research on the role of the Ombudsman during this academic year as a member of the International Ombudsman Association. The ombuds (staff and faculty) worked on potentially developing a USC Ombuds Charter. It was decided at the end of the current academic year that the Staff Ombuds would continue to work on this endeavor, but the Faculty Ombuds position would remain as it currently was.

This is the third year of Dr. DiPietro's term as Faculty Ombuds and she is stepping down from the position. In July 2026, the new Faculty Ombuds for the upcoming academic years, Dr. Caroline Nagel, was introduced to the role of Faculty Ombuds. In August 2026, all stakeholders to the ombuds position including the new Vice Provost, Dr. Angela Baum, met to discuss the role of the Faculty Ombuds and the various stakeholders that are available for the Faculty Ombuds to use in their role. These people can help to provide faculty members with the resources that the University has for them for concerns that they have.

Visitors and Topics of Concern (2025-2026)

During the period of this report (August 1, 2025 to August 10th, 2026) the University ombudsman met with 65 distinct faculty members of whom 53 (82%) were first time visitors and 12 had met with the ombuds office before. Some of the faculty members had more than one concern or issue, so these were noted as distinct categories and concerns within the month that they occurred. There were a total of 76 concerns brought forward this year. These cases may have involved the University ombudsman's simply listening to a visitor's concern, offering information about University policies and procedures, discussing a concern and clarifying an issue, helping identify and evaluate a range of options for resolving a problem, gathering information and offering referrals to other resources, helping visitors prepare for a difficult conversation with a faculty member or administrator, facilitating communication. The University ombudsman also looks for trends in issues and makes recommendations for institutional change as appropriate. Approximately 40% of the conversations this year were with professional track faculty. The majority of concerns related to peer and colleague relationships as well as evaluative relationships.

In the majority of situations, the Ombuds was able to provide the faculty members with information on resources at the University of South Carolina including the Office of Faculty Affairs, Title IX office, Human Resources, Professional Development, and the Office of Faculty Civility.

In order to preserve the confidentiality of visitors to the University ombudsman, no notes, documents, or records of any kind are maintained related to the identity of individual faculty members including their gender, race, department, college or school. The only information retained from contacts by faculty visitors with the University ombudsman is that regarding the nature of the issue discussed. The International Ombudsman Association has a series of nine standardized reporting categories under which are an extensive series of subcategories that permit placement of any issue, question, concern, or inquiry. Faculty conflicts and concerns are described under the appropriate category.

It is worth noting that in the opinion of the Faculty Ombuds, during the current year, many of the faculty concerns and questions could have been addressed and possibly resolved by Department Chairs with proper training in communication skills and mediation skills. Many of the issues that were brought to the faculty ombuds were referred to the ombuds office by the department chair, but really could have been more easily resolved within the department. During these conversations, the ombuds referred the faculty member back to the department chair and also offered other resources in addition.

Uniform Reporting Categories – faculty concerns in each category (2025-2026)

(1) Compensation & Benefits - *Questions, concerns, issues or inquiries about the equity, appropriateness and competitiveness of employee compensation, benefits and other benefit programs.* 3 concerns in this category (*3.9%).

(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).* 21 concerns were brought up in this category (*27.63%). *decreased by 10% over last year's report

(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).* 22 concerns in this category (*28.9%).

(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).* 11 concerns in this category (*14.47%) * increased by 10% over last year's report

(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.* 11 concerns in this category (*14.5%)

(6) Safety, Health, and Physical Environment - *Questions, concerns, issues or inquiries about Safety, Health and Infrastructure-related issues.* 8 concerns in this category (*10.5%) * 8% increase in this category over last year's report. Concerns over online safety and privacy, as well as one or two facility concerns.

(7) Services/Administrative Issues - *Questions, concerns, issues or inquiries about services or administrative offices.* 1 concern in this category (*.13%)

(8) Organizational, Strategic, and Mission Related - *Questions, concerns, issues or inquiries that relate to the whole or some part of an organization.* 1 concern in this category (*.13%)

(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.* 1 concern in this category (*.13%)

*current percent of concerns (2025-2026) (n=76)

Final Comments

It is noteworthy that now there are student advocacy, staff ombuds, and faculty ombuds offices that are fully operational and helpful.

As noted above, in the opinion of the Faculty Ombuds, during the current year, many of the faculty concerns and questions could have been addressed by Department Chairs with proper training in communication skills and mediation skills. Many of the issues that were brought to the faculty ombuds were referred to the ombuds office by the department chair, but could have been more easily resolved within the department.

Previous Annual Reports may be found on the University Ombudsman Website at http://www.sc.edu/ombuds/annual.shtml

Reporting Categories	August	September	October	November	December	January	February	March	April	May	June	July
Evaluative Relationships	3	1		3	2	2	2		2	2	3	1
Career Progress and Development	2			2	2	1		1	1	1	1	
Peer and Colleague Relationships	2	2	3		3		3	1	2	2	1	3
Legal, Regulatory, Financial and Compliance			1	3		1	1	1	1	1	1	1
Compensation and Benefits	1						1			1		
Values, Ethics and Standards				1								
Safety, Health and Physical Environment		1			1	1	3		1	1		
Services Administrative Issues								1				
Organizational, Strategic, and Mission Related									1			
Number of Faculty Concerns	6	4	4	8	8	5	10	4	8	8	6	5