

## University Ombudsman at USC

In August 2023, Robin DiPietro, a professor in the School of Hospitality and Tourism Management became the second Faculty Ombuds for University of South Carolina- Columbia Campus. She has maintained her membership with the International Ombudsman Association since August 2023 and has utilized resources from the IOA to inform her practice an ombuds. 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](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>

## 2024-2025 Activities

Throughout this year, the University of South Carolina continued working on distinguishing the Office of Student Ombudsman to the Office of Student Advocacy. There continued to be approximately 2-3 emails or phone calls per months this academic year to the Faculty Ombudsman related to student issues. These emails required at least one response to direct the students and parents to the new website and contact information.

In early August 2024, the University ombuds met with the Vice Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences on the role of the office of the Faculty Ombuds and provided information to the participants at the session with information on typical information and concerns that are brought to the ombuds offices.

In September 2024, the University ombudsman gave a presentation on the work of the ombudsman to participants in the Pipeline for Academy Leadership (PAL) program to help develop the leadership skills and knowledge of the office of the ombuds of tenured faculty on SEC campuses.

## Visitors and Topics of Concern (2024-2025)

During the period of this report (August 15, 2024 to August 14, 2025) the University ombudsman met with 65 individual faculty members. Some of these faculty members were first time visitors to the Ombuds office (approximately 45 or 69.2%) and some faculty members came to visit the Ombuds on multiple occasions about the same issues or different issues. There were 76 overall concerns or questions brought to the Ombuds' attention. 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.

In the majority of situations, the Ombuds was able to provide the faculty members with information on sources 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.

### **Uniform Reporting Categories – faculty concerns in each category (2024-2025)**

(1) Compensation & Benefits - *Questions, concerns, issues or inquiries about the equity, appropriateness and competitiveness of employee compensation, benefits and other benefit programs.* 6 visitors in this category (\*7.9%) (1 visitor in 2023-2024) \*\*8.24%.

(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).* 17 visitors in this category (\*22.37%) (14 visitors in 2023-2024) \*\*28.1%.

(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).* 12 visitors in this category (\*15.79%) (11 visitors in 2023-2024) \*\*11.8%.

(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).* 5 visitors in this category (\*6.6%) (2 visitors in 2023-2024) \*\*17.3%.

(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.* 18 visitors in this category (\*23.68%) (5 visitors in 2023-2024) \*\*10.4%.

(6) **Safety, Health, and Physical Environment** - *Questions, concerns, issues or inquiries about Safety, Health and Infrastructure-related issues.* 11 visitors in this category (\*14.47%) (1 visitors in 2023-2024) \*\*5.8%.

(7) Services/Administrative Issues - *Questions, concerns, issues or inquiries about services or administrative offices.* 1 visitor in this category (\*1.3%) (0 visitors in 2023-2024) \*\*5.7%.

(8) Organizational, Strategic, and Mission Related - *Questions, concerns, issues or inquiries that relate to the whole or some part of an organization.* 1 visitor in this category (\*1.3%) (0 visitors in 2023-2024) \*\*4.84%.

(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.* 5 visitors in this category (\*6.6%) (3 visitors in 2023-2024) \*\*7.8%.

\*current percent of visitors (2024-2025)

\*\*past 17-year percentage of visitors

## Final Comments

**It is worth noting that the University of South Carolina Columbia campus ombudsman is not available to help the other USC campuses with their concerns and conflicts. There are people available on each of the campuses that can help them- whether it be Deans or Chancellors or other campus ombudsman. The services of the University ombudsman is available to tenured, tenure track and non-tenure track faculty on the Columbia campus.**

It is noteworthy that more than at any other time in recent history, there were complaints about students harassing faculty members, both via phone/email and on social media. Highlighted are categories #5 **Legal, Regulatory, Financial and Compliance** and #6 **Safety, Health, and Physical Environment** as these categories were noted and brought to the Ombuds attention at a higher rate than the 17 year trend.

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