

University of South Alabama Faculty Ombudsperson

April 2013

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Role:

The University of South Alabama Faculty Ombudsperson is an independent, confidential and impartial resource available to the faculty to facilitate cooperation and consensus through education and mediation. The ombudsperson is a designated neutral or impartial dispute resolution practitioner whose major function is to provide confidential and informal assistance to faculty of the institution. Serving as a designated neutral, the Ombudsperson is not an advocate for any individual, the University, or any academic unit; rather, he/she serves as an advocate for fairness and acts as a source of information and referral, aids in answering questions, and assists in the resolution of concerns and critical situations.

More specifically, the ombudsperson engenders awareness and skill development in the areas of conflict resolution, communication, team-building, and civility.

The ombudsperson endeavors to assist all tenured, tenure-track, non-tenure track, clinical, research, and annual appointment faculty members in the resolution of concerns and complaints with the goal of promoting alternatives to adversarial processes. Activities of the ombudsperson do not supplant the University's existing formal Faculty Grievance, Equal Opportunity Employment, Sexual Harassment Resolution, or other existing complaint resolution processes. Staff and student conflicts should be directed to the Department of Human Resources and the Division of Student Affairs respectively.

Responsibilities:

Dispute Resolution/Consultation and Referral:

- Provide impartial and – to the extent allowed by law and University policy - confidential consultation to members of the faculty who consider themselves to have been aggrieved or are concerned about an issue
- Remain independent, neutral, and impartial, and exercise good judgment
- Assist inquirers in interpreting policies and procedures, seeking input from appropriate offices when needed
- Provide assistance to inquirers by 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 ombudsperson may be an appropriate option, obtain the inquirer's agreement and permission before proceeding
- If necessary, and while maintaining allowable confidentiality, conduct appropriate informal fact-finding in order to better understand an issue from all perspectives
- Consult with faculty and administrators to develop cooperative strategies for complaint resolution
- 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
- When legal/disciplinary issues arise, the ombudsperson refers the case to the appropriate unit of the

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Policy Analysis and Feedback:

- Serve as a campus resource for officials in formulating or modifying policy and procedures
- Based on anonymous aggregate data, prepare reports for the Faculty Senate and University administration that discuss trends in the reporting of grievances and concerns, identify patterns or problem areas in policies and practices, and recommend revisions and improvements, where appropriate
- Act as a liaison between individuals and groups and the administrative structure, serving as a communicator or informal facilitator, as appropriate
- Function as a sensor within the University community to identify problems or trends that affect the faculty
- Provide early warning of new areas of organizational concern, upward feedback, and critical analysis of systemic need for improvement, and make recommendations for systemic changes

Community Outreach and Education:

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

Confidentiality:

To the extent permitted by law and any policy of the University, the ombudsperson will endeavor to protect the confidentiality and privacy of those seeking assistance. Unless required by law or where serious threat to life or property exists, neither the identity of those who contact the ombudsperson nor the substance of their concerns will be shared, nor will any specific action related to the individual's concerns be taken without the consent of the individual. Within the parameters previously discussed, all information provided to the ombudsperson will remain confidential and will be maintained in a secure location for use only by the ombudsperson. **Notification of the ombudsperson will not constitute notice to the University.** The ombudsperson will provide the individual with the contact information of the appropriate University office with whom the individual may make a formal report or grievance.

Selection:

The Faculty Ombudsperson is selected by the President of the University in consultation with the Faculty Senate.

Reporting:

The Ombudsperson submits to the Faculty Senate and to the University administration at least annually a report that discusses trends in the reporting of concerns, identifies patterns or problem areas in policy and practices, and recommends revisions and improvements, as appropriate.