

OFFICE POLICIES AND PROCEDURES
FOR THE
GRINNELL COLLEGE OMBUDS OFFICE

I. INTRODUCTION

This document details the operating policies and procedures for the Grinnell College Ombuds Office, and is intended to supplement college policies and guidelines, the Charter Agreement endorsed by the college President and Ombuds, the Code of Ethics and Standards of Practice of the International Ombudsman Association (“IOA”), and applicable laws. These policies and procedures will be updated and revised when necessary.

The Office of the Ombuds is located in the JRC 311. The office serves students, faculty, and staff by offering a confidential, neutral, and independent dispute resolution service. The Ombuds mission is to ensure that all members of the College community receive fair and equitable treatment within the college.

2. CONFIDENTIALITY and INDEPENDENCE

Confidentiality and independence are critical characteristics of the office. The Ombuds receives every new complaint with the presumption of confidentiality and never divulges a visitor's name or the nature of a complaint to anyone without the visitor's consent. The Ombuds is not an administrative officer of the college and does not report to any administrative office or constituency group. The office does not keep records on behalf of the college, and consultation with the office does not constitute notice to the college of any complaint or grievance. The Ombuds does not testify in any formal proceedings concerning matters brought in confidence to the office.

II. DUTIES OF THE OMBUDS

The College Ombuds directs the activities of the Ombuds Office. The Ombuds responsibilities include: meeting and consulting with visitors; representing and promoting the activities of the office; developing written materials used by the office; maintaining statistical data reflecting office usage; administering the budget and financial affairs of the office, and consulting with and providing upward feedback to College administrators. Upward feedback means providing information regarding trends or systemic concerns, and making recommendations to senior leadership and senior management.

III. GENERAL OFFICE PRACTICES

A. Keys and Passwords

The Ombuds Office is kept locked whenever unoccupied. Access to the Ombuds Office voicemail, email and computer files is protected by passwords selected by the Ombuds. Case

notes are kept in a locked filing cabinet with the Ombuds having the only key. (Facilities Management may have the master key to the filing cabinet, however, the filing cabinet is also padlocked. The Ombuds retains the only key to the padlock.)

B. Responding to Inquiries

The Ombuds makes every effort to respond to inquiries and requests for assistance within one business day of receipt.

The Ombuds explains and clarifies the established policies and procedures of the College, and actively represents the College's commitment to fundamental fairness in its community. The Ombuds does not have the power to order changes in rules, regulations, policies, procedures, or the behavior of others; however, the Ombuds does have an obligation to bring to administrators' attention any policies, programs, or personnel or institutional decisions which the Ombuds believes violate the rights of students, faculty, or staff. The Ombuds has access to all information and all individuals in the organization, as permitted by law. Questions concerning reasonably required access will be resolved by the college counsel in consultation with the Ombuds and other appropriate college administration.

C. Opening and Closing Cases

A new case is opened whenever a new visitor comes to the Ombuds Office with a concern; or a visitor already consulting with the Ombuds identifies a new and unrelated concern.¹ Case notes are closed and destroyed when the Ombuds determines that a visitor's matter has concluded or two weeks has passed since the last communication from the visitor, whichever is sooner. Notes and other documents, whether obtained by the Ombuds or provided by the visitor, are shredded. Electronic notes and related information are deleted. (Presently, for the purposes of scheduling, the office maintains electronic data on visitors – no names, just initials and visitor category)

D. Handling Anonymous Complaints

Unsolicited and anonymous communications are kept in a discrete folder for one week. If, during that time, the author contacts the office and requests assistance, the case is handled as a new matter. If the author does not contact the office, the communication is deleted and any notes are destroyed. Unsolicited and anonymous communications remain confidential unless they contain information that indicates a credible likelihood of imminent physical harm. In this situation, the Ombuds will disclose the unsolicited and anonymous communication to Human Resources and/or the Dean of Students. If there is threat of immediate danger, the communication may also be disclosed to campus safety.

E. Calendars

Details of visitor meetings are not recorded in the electronic calendar (i.e., Microsoft

¹ The term "visitor" refers to any person or group that contacts the Ombuds Office for assistance. This term is used instead of "client," which implies that the office is representing or advocating for the person(s) who contacted the office.

Outlook) or physical calendar. To protect confidentiality, visitor meetings are calendared only as “Appointments” or with similarly vague descriptions. Only administrative meetings or other non-visitor matters are described in the Ombuds Office calendars.

IV. RECORD RETENTION POLICY

A. Electronic Records

1. Voice recorded telephone messages are listened to and deleted immediately from the voicemail system. Messages should be returned by the Ombuds the same day they are received unless the Ombuds is out of the office.
2. Messages received by email related to specific cases are deleted immediately after reading. Visitors are discouraged from detailing confidential communication in email messages.
3. The Ombuds Office computer is not backed up on the College system, and is maintained on a separate server.

Email sent from the Ombuds Office includes the following disclosure:

NOTICE: Please be advised that consistent with the confidential, neutral, and informal nature of the services of the Office of the Ombudsperson, communication with this office does not put Grinnell College on notice, and no documentation is retained. Note also that email is not appropriate for confidential communications.

This e-mail message and any attachments are confidential and intended for use solely by the intended recipient. If you have received this e-mail in error, please immediately advise the sender by return e-mail and delete this message.

B. Physical Records

1. Case Materials

Notes and other materials related to visitors’ cases, whether provided by the visitor or obtained by the Ombuds, are kept with the case notes. All case materials are destroyed when the case is closed.

2. Administrative Materials

The Ombuds Office maintains its own administrative records, including budget, marketing and resource materials.

V. INTERACTIONS WITH VISITORS

A. Grievance Procedures, Disciplinary Process, and Jurisdiction

The Ombuds generally is not involved in the substance of formal appeal procedures, but may make inquiries about alleged irregularities in the proceedings. The Ombuds may decline a case when judging intervention inappropriate. The Office of the Ombuds is independent of the college disciplinary process. The Ombuds may choose, but is not required, to take up conflicts with individuals, companies, or organizations falling outside the jurisdiction of the college when the issues involve the college. However, the Ombuds may have limited ability to help in these cases.

B. Visitor Meetings

1. Location

The Ombuds may meet with visitors by telephone or, preferably, in person. Face-to-face meetings may take place in the Ombuds Office or at another location. The primary consideration for the meeting location should be ensuring confidentiality. If meeting in the office, the door should be closed to ensure privacy. If the meeting takes place out of the office, the Ombuds should ensure that third parties cannot overhear the conversation. One-on-one meetings should not take place in private residences.

2. Initial Disclosures

At the outset of the initial meeting and before discussing the visitor's concerns, the Ombuds shall reiterate the confidential, neutral, independent and informal tenets of the Ombuds Office. The visitor shall be told that the Ombuds does not give legal or psychological advice; does not keep records; and does not become involved in the substance of formal proceedings or actions. The visitor shall be advised that there may be formal remedies available (i.e., grievances, complaints, legal actions), and if the visitor wants to pursue a formal remedy, the Ombuds will refer the visitor to the appropriate office. The Ombuds shall make sure that the visitor has a copy of the brochure and has been advised about the website. The Ombuds shall disclose, as soon as possible, all actual and potential conflicts of interest that could reasonably be seen as raising questions about the Ombuds' impartiality.

3. Consultations

The structure of a consultation necessarily depends upon the circumstances: including the visitor's emotional state, the urgency of the visitor's situation, and limitations on the Ombuds. It is therefore impossible to predict how the conversation will develop and the Ombuds should remain flexible.

The Ombuds generally will begin by encouraging a candid discussion of the visitor's concerns. The Ombuds listens to the visitor's story patiently and objectively. When appropriate, the Ombuds asks questions to elicit salient details. The Ombuds should not express agreement or disagreement with any aspect of the visitor's perspective, but should demonstrate empathy and understanding. The Ombuds should ask the visitor who else they have consulted and what actions the visitor has already considered.

Once the visitor has conveyed the significant aspects of their concern, the Ombuds should take a moment to summarize the current situation. The Ombuds will acknowledge and discuss any formal processes available and any applicable college policies and rules. The Ombuds will make visitors aware of the importance of consulting other professionals and

stakeholders to help visitors make informed decisions. The Ombuds will discuss the range of potential options for resolution, and highlight the significant costs and benefits of each. The Ombuds will assist the visitor in developing a strategy for resolving the concerns.

4. Follow-Up Meetings

Further communications between the Ombuds and visitor may be necessary if the visitor's concerns are not addressed in the initial meeting. Follow-up communications from the Ombuds are as discrete as possible. Unless permission is expressly given, the Ombuds will not identify the office, or disclose substantive matters in voicemail messages for visitors. The Ombuds also will avoid substantive discussions by email.

The Ombuds is conscious of the fact that some Ombuds Office visitors will want to retain their anonymity if they subsequently run into the Ombuds elsewhere on campus. Some people will be very open in their greetings ("It's good to see you again!"). Others will act as if they have never met the Ombuds before ("How nice to meet you.") Still others will walk by without even a "Hello." The Ombuds allows former visitors to set the tone at any unexpected meetings on or off campus.

5. Withdrawing From Matters

If the Ombuds is unable to work with a visitor in an impartial manner, the Ombuds shall disclose that fact to the visitor promptly and withdraw from the matter. If possible, the Ombuds will refer the visitor to other resources that may provide assistance.

6. Job Security and Protection of Students

No retaliatory action is to be taken against a student, staff, or faculty member because the individual consulted with the Ombuds Office. Visiting the Ombuds Office should not jeopardize an employee's job security, promotion, tenure, scholarly opportunities, or performance evaluations. Neither will it jeopardize student evaluations or grades.

7. Release Time from Work

A staff member who requests time to visit the Office of the Ombuds during working hours should not be denied the opportunity to do so and may request time during normal working hours for the initial appointment. For subsequent appointments, employees may need to request additional release time through the Office of the Ombuds. Employees who prefer not to notify their supervisors of their intention to visit the Ombuds Office may make special arrangements for noon, wellness time, or after-hours appointments.

VI. INTERACTIONS WITH CAMPUS COMMUNITY

A. Outreach

The Ombuds attends annual events to promote the mission of the Ombuds Office, including new student orientations, staff and faculty meetings, and new hire receptions. On an on-going basis, the Ombuds will initiate contact with new Vice Presidents, Academic

deans, and Student Organization officers.

B. Meetings with Administrators

The Ombuds meets approximately every month with the College President. In addition, the Ombuds should meet quarterly with the Director of Human Resources, Vice President for Academic Affairs and Dean of the College, Vice President for Student Affairs, Dean of Students, and Vice President for Finance and Treasurer of the College. The purpose of these meetings will vary, but may include upward feedback and discussions of current campus issues.

C. Informing the College Community about the Ombuds Office

The Ombuds Office should prepare and submit an annual report to the President yearly. The annual reports provide an opportunity to share information about user trends and important issues that merit the attention of the administration. This report is not intended to place the College on official notice of any problems, nor does it specifically identify any visitors who have sought the services of the Ombuds Office. The Annual Report is posted on the Ombuds Office website after it has been finally updated and submitted to the President.

VII. OFFICE USAGE DATA

At or about the time of the initial meeting with a visitor, the Ombuds collects statistics for the purpose of analyzing case trends. The statistical information gathered (if known) consists of the following: method of contact; appointment type; gender; referral source; relationship to Grinnell College (i.e., student, staff, faculty, administrator, alum, or parent); nature of concern; resource provided; outcome; number of participants; total contacts; date closed; and time spent. This data is then entered into an Excel worksheet for later evaluation by the Ombuds.

VIII. MISCELLANEOUS POLICIES

A. Informational Materials

In all print and electronic materials, the Ombuds Office clearly states that its services are confidential, neutral, independent and informal. Brochures and the website reiterate the four ethical tenets, and explain that the Ombuds Office does not accept notice, keep records, or participate in any formal processes. Links to the Charter, IOA Code and Standards, and this document are available through the Ombuds Office website.

B. Office Hours

The Ombuds Office publicizes the days and times the Ombuds is available for appointments. On reasonable notice, the Ombuds is available to meet outside of typical hours to accommodate visitors. If the office will be closed for a day or more, the Ombuds will: notify the President's office; change the outgoing voicemail greeting; and post a notice on the Ombuds Office door.

