



Periodic Report
University of California Riverside
Office of the Ombuds
July 2014—June 2015



OFFICE OF THE
OMBUDS
*A safe place to navigate
through difficulties at UCR*

A NOTE FROM THE UCR OMBUDS



This past academic has been the busiest since I arrived in 2011. I continue to feel privileged to work with visitors to the Ombuds office as they strive to navigate their way through various challenges. And I remain grateful for the dedication of the University leadership and community that is committed to continually improving the ways conflicts and complaints are addressed within the University.

In the midst of significant leadership turnover over the last couple of years there has been a groundswell of interest in developing a more collaborative culture at UCR. As the Ombuds I am excited by this development because I find that collaborative processes are extremely valuable. They are central to my everyday work and training and could be very helpful to UCR in realizing its strategic goals. However, cultivating a more collaborative culture is no small challenge. Effective collaboration is difficult to realize consistently in practice. So, in the interest of encouraging this budding movement, I have chosen “Collaboration” as the theme of this report and have included some reflections on collaboration in the form of some very broad suggestions to consider when building effective collaborative processes. While these suggestions are far from exhaustive, hopefully they provide some helpful guidance for overcoming some of the common hurdles encountered in collaborative processes. Please feel free to contact me if you have further interest in collaboration.



Respectfully submitted,

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OVERVIEW OF THE OMBUDS OFFICE

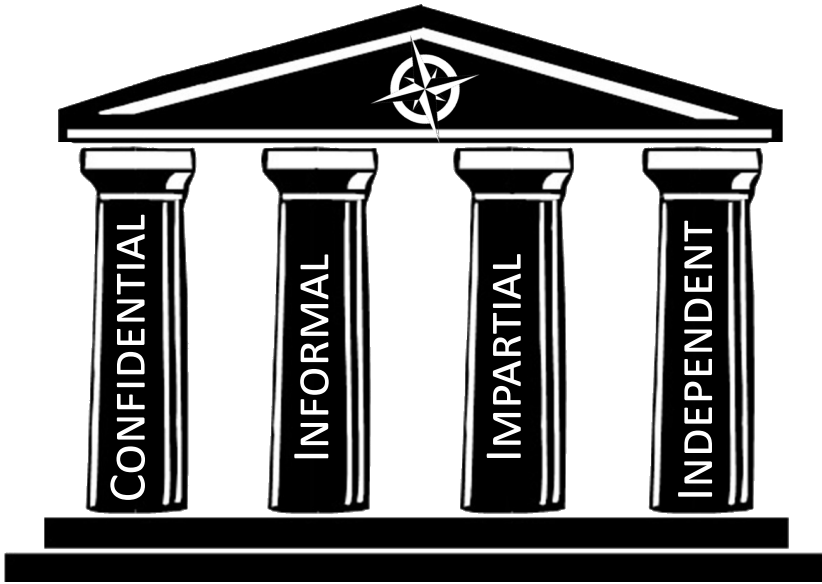


Figure 1: The Four Ethical Pillars of Ombuds Practice

The Ombuds Office provides visitors with a confidential, impartial environment, to help assess a difficult situation and to identify and evaluate a range of options for how to address it. Additionally, with the permission of the visitor the Ombuds Office may engage the relevant parties in an effort to address the situation informally. The Ombuds meets regularly with campus administrators to provide feedback on systemic issues without breaching the confidentiality of communications with individual visitors.

The relationship between UCR and the Ombuds Office, and the contours of the role of the Ombuds Office are memorialized in the [UCR Ombuds Office Charter](#).

The charter is built upon the four ethical pillars of ombuds practice: Confidentiality*, Impartiality, Independence, and Informality. See page 7 for a list of services provided by the Ombuds office.

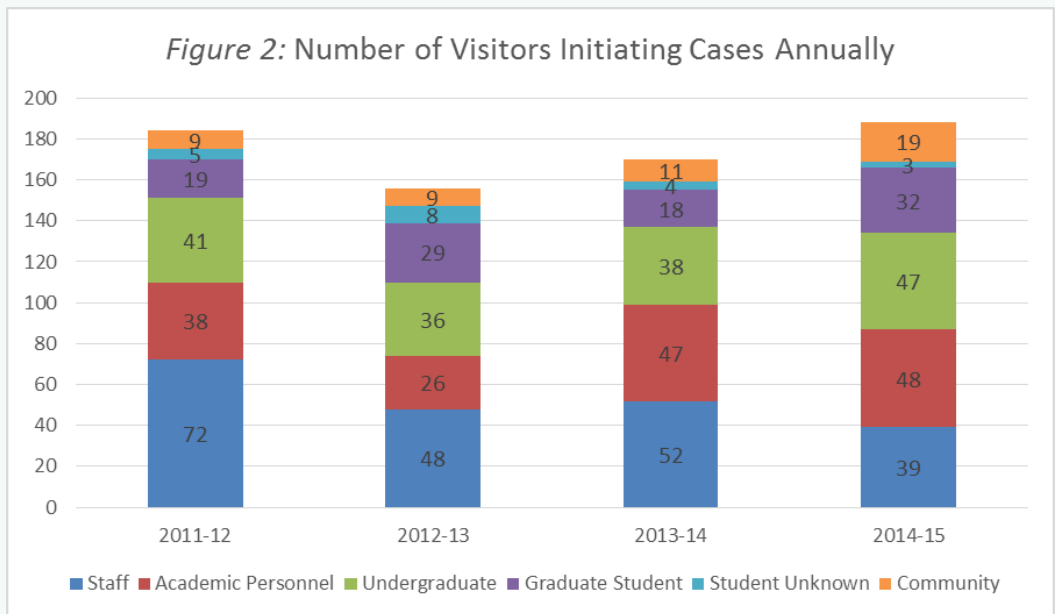
*unless the Ombuds perceives there to be an imminent threat of serious physical harm. Also note that due to confidentiality protections, communications with the Ombuds does not constitute notice to UCR.

STATISTICAL DATA

188 individuals consulted with the Ombuds Office in 2014-2015. Typically these consultations involve multiple conversations. Note that these statistics account for individual consultations only and do not include workshops, outreach initiatives or conversations with administrators.

Figure 2 provides a breakdown of the demographics of visitors who have consulted with the Ombuds Office over the last four years.

Figure 2: Number of Visitors Initiating Cases Annually



SIX SIMPLE SUGGESTIONS FOR EFFECTIVE COLLABORATION



1) PLAN AND STRUCTURE THE PROCESS

There is much more to a collaborative process than just gathering everyone in a room. Effective collaborative processes require detailed planning.

Without sufficient thought and time invested in designing the process, it can easily lose focus and drift, becoming a disorganized confusion of voices. Additionally, a tremendous amount of time can be wasted talking about the wrong issues. Collaborative processes require time and effort from a large group of people and so not every issue is appropriate for a collaborative process. For example, a half-hour discussion by a committee on what font to use in a brochure is probably not an efficient use of time regardless of how collaborative the discussion is. Without the appropriate structure participants will eventually become frustrated and disengage and the process will stall.

One important element of process design includes setting and clarifying expectations in advance, as to what the process will entail. Important questions include, “How long will the process take?” “What is to be determined?” “How are decisions to be made and by whom?” and “What roles are participants expected to play?”

2) ATTEND TO POWER DYNAMICS

Universities are hierarchical organizations, and so collaborative processes often cut across hierarchies and not merely silos.

If the power dynamics involved are not accounted for, they can undermine the process in a variety of ways. One unhealthy dynamic is group think, where participants defer to the recognized authority in the room, without thoroughly considering the issue. Another dynamic is that the subject matter experts with the greatest knowledge of the situation censor themselves because they do not feel sufficiently empowered to speak up. Also, the process can become an arena for a power showdown between different divisions within the university, particularly when there is uncertainty or confusion over the decision making process or the boundaries of authority.

How power dynamics are accounted for depends upon the specific context. The most important issue is that they are considered. Some ways of accounting for power dynamics include: clarifying decision making in advance, acknowledging and respecting lines of authority, structuring the discussion to invite broader participation, enlisting the assistance of those in the room with power, or separating the facilitative function from the decision making function (See further discussion about facilitation in suggestion 5 below).

3) CULTIVATE AND TAP INTO CONVICTION FOR COLLABORATION

There are valuable skills and techniques that can be learned and honed to help foster collaboration. However, more important than any skill is the internal conviction to collaborate. Without this motivation, collaborative efforts are not pursued seriously and abandoned easily. The skills become ineffective when they have no real heart behind them. Collaboration becomes an empty buzzword and people become cynical about the collaborative endeavor.

SIX SIMPLE SUGGESTIONS FOR EFFECTIVE COLLABORATION (CON'T)



Very few people are likely to speak up and say “I do not want to be collaborative.” However, for a collaborative culture to take hold and persist, participants need to see real value in collaboration rather than merely seeing it as a good thing to do.

So, in order to sustain a collaborative movement, it may be important to find ways of helping campus constituents, both individually and collectively, to identify and connect with reasons for valuing collaboration. The reasons may be varied. Some may focus on improved operational efficacies. For others it may be a means of promoting diversity. For still others it may come from an ability to recognize issues as systemic campus-wide issues rather than issues that merely impact them individually or their local unit. And some may need to first experience the fruits of a successful collaborative effort firsthand.

4) BUILD IN OPPORTUNITIES TO REFLECT AND ASSESS

Many of the most difficult challenges are systemic in nature. Much of the contemporary systems research emphasizes the complex, dynamic, and reactive nature of systems, and the innate ability for systemic problems to mutate and persist. The implication is that systemic problems are difficult to solve, require creative solutions and often require multiple iterations of problem solving.

If collaborative efforts focus primarily on reaching a consensus in decision making and moving on, without building in opportunities to reflect and assess more deeply, the danger is that the process becomes a shallow exercise in “checking the box” without really addressing the deeper, underlying systemic issue. The problem merely resurfaces in a different form.

Building in opportunities for reflection and assessment increases the chances of impacting the underlying root causes of the problem and not just its symptoms. Additionally, it provides an opportunity to stay on top of the problem through multiple iterations.

One deterrent to an honest collaborative assessment in any organization is blame. Participants may avoid assessing altogether for fear of being blamed or of blaming others. Or, if an assessment is made, one party may feel blamed by another, undermining the ability of the group to collaborate effectively. One way of addressing the blame problem is to shift from a “blame frame” to a “contribution frame” (see table 1).

Table 1	Blame Frame	Contribution Frame
Question	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Who is at fault?” 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “How did we all contribute to the problem?”
Goals	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Judgment • Punishment 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Understanding • Problem Solving
Analysis	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cause and effect • “What is the single cause?” 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Systemic • “What are the interactions that produced this result?”
Time Frame	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Backward looking 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Forward looking
Responsibility	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Individual Scapegoat 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Collective Responsibility
Typical Participant Response	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “How can I avoid blame?” 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “What’s my contribution?”

1 DOUGLAS STONE, BRUCE PATTON & SHEILA HEEN, DIFFICULT CONVERSATIONS: HOW TO DISCUSS WHAT MATTERS MOST 58-82 (2d ed. 2010).

SIX SIMPLE SUGGESTIONS FOR EFFECTIVE COLLABORATION (CON'T)



A contribution frame recognizes that thorny systemic problems are commonplace in large organizations composed predominantly of competent, well-intentioned individuals. A contribution frame asks “How are we all contributing to this problem, both individually and collectively, and what can we do to address it?” rather than “On who should we pin responsibility for creating this unmitigated disaster so that the rest of us can be absolved of all wrongdoing?”

5) CULTIVATE CORE COMMUNICATION SKILLS

Collaboration requires effective communication skills from engaged participants. These skills are not rocket science. They may be more instinctive to some than to others, but almost anyone can hone their communication abilities through study and practice.

Without good communication skills in a group, the communication patterns will fall into dysfunctional ruts, and the team will struggle to collaborate effectively.

Important communication skills for collaboration include: (among others) active listening, interest-based dialogue, and facilitation. Facilitation skills may be particularly important to cultivate within the campus community, since a well-facilitated meeting goes a long way in setting a collaborative tone. In most organizations the facilitator of the process is typically the member of the group with the greatest authority. Collaborative groups might consider experimenting with others (perhaps even from outside the group) facilitating the process.

6) EXERCISE LEADERSHIP

It is extremely difficult to establish a collaborative culture without active leadership from those in authority. Most of the tasks described above are leadership tasks. To recap, these include planning and structuring the collaborative effort, establishing expectations in advance, attending to power dynamics, inviting and empowering others to engage, setting the tone and establishing a culture of collaboration, cultivating conviction from participants in the collaborative process, creating space for members to reflect and assess rather than being satisfied with “checking the box”, promoting a contribution frame, and identifying and cultivating core communication skills both in themselves and in others.

The Ombuds may be able to assist in the development of collaborative processes by:

- Consulting on the design of a process
- Identifying helpful resources
- Delivering workshops
- Serving as a facilitator (situation dependent)

For more information contact the Ombuds Office

OMBUDS OFFICE SERVICES



SERVICES FOR INDIVIDUALS

Individual Confidential Consultations – Members of the UCR community can consult confidentially with the Ombuds Office. Visitors commonly seek consultations:

- For options on how to proceed on a difficult problem or conflict.
- For assistance in raising a concern about unfair treatment
- For conflict coaching in how to improve dynamics with a colleague or supervisor
- For assistance on how to manage team dynamics
- For clarity on relevant policies and procedures

Workshops – The Ombuds Office offers a variety of workshops on conflict-related skills including: understanding and navigating conflict, conflict management, communication, fairness, and ethics. They are available through the UC Learning Center and upon request.

SERVICES FOR SMALL GROUPS (typically 2-4 people)

Confidential Conflict Facilitation/Mediation – With the permission of the parties involved, the Ombuds serves as an impartial third-party facilitator or intermediary in informally addressing conflict between parties. This facilitative approach provides opportunities to address underlying dynamics as well as the surface level dispute.

SERVICES FOR ORGANIZATIONAL UNITS / TEAMS / DEPARTMENTS

Presentations - Informational presentations on Ombuds Office services can be made at unit meetings. Basic presentations are typically about 15 minutes and can be augmented to include conflict management skills and Q&A.

Workshops – Workshops can be tailored to the needs of particular units on a variety of conflict-related skills including: understanding and navigating conflict, abrasive conduct, conflict management, communication, fairness, collaboration, and ethics.

Group Facilitation – The Ombuds is available to serve as a impartial third party facilitator for meetings or retreats on various topics including strategic planning, constructive feedback, negotiating partnership, role clarification.

Conflict Wellness - Conflict Wellness involves preventing toxic conflict by creating and maintaining a healthy environment. The Ombuds has a variety of tools to help units promote Conflict Wellness. One such tool is the use of communication protocols, which allow units to establish expectations about how they are to work through conflict in advance.

Group Intervention - When units are experiencing internal tension or conflict, the Ombuds can assist the unit in collectively assessing the situation and improving working dynamics.

Systemic feedback – The Ombuds identifies to appropriate members of administration patterns or emergent systemic challenges that could use attention, without breaching confidentiality of individual visitors to the Ombuds Office. The feedback helps address systemic problems proactively and preventatively.

All of these services are delivered only with the voluntary consent of the involved parties and at the discretion of the Ombuds Office.



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