

# Dietrich School of Arts and Sciences Ombuds Office Charter

## Introduction

The Dietrich School of Arts and Sciences (“DSAS”) and College of General Studies (CGS) Ombuds Office (“the Office”) opened in September 2024 to support faculty, staff, postdocs, and graduate students who face academic or work-related challenges or have conflicts with other individuals at the University. The Office will serve as an independent, informal, impartial, and confidential resource for members of the DSAS and CGS community. Individuals who use the services of the Office are referred to as “Visitors” in this document.

The Office is staffed by ombudspersons who have received training from the *International Ombuds Association (IOA)* and who practice in accordance with the provisions of this Charter as well as the IOA’s [Code of Ethics](#) and [Standards of Practice](#). The Office’s ombudspersons will be members of the IOA, will attend relevant IOA training sessions and obtain continuing education through attendance at the annual IOA meetings.

## Mission

The mission of the Ombuds office is to assist Visitors in managing challenges and resolving conflicts they may have with other members of the university community as an alternative to pursuing formal channels of resolution. This work contributes to the broader mission of the Office, which is to foster a positive working environment in which all community members are treated with kindness, empathy, and respect and to contribute to an environment in which all community members receive fair and equitable treatment.

Engaging with the Office is entirely voluntary, and those who seek support from the Office have the right to do so without retribution or retaliation for utilizing its services. Any form of retaliation for exercising this right will not be tolerated, and individuals who engage in retaliation will be subject to possible disciplinary action.

## Functions of the Office

The role of the ombudspersons includes:

- Listening and helping Visitors to analyze conflictual situations and to clarify the Visitor’s key concerns and interests;
- Providing Visitors with information (e.g., organizational policies and procedures, appropriate resources and/or processes both internal and external) and exploring options for resolving conflict or surfacing issues of concern;
- Identifying and sharing University and other resources with Visitors;
- Collecting data on emerging trends and patterns while safeguarding Visitor anonymity and confidentiality;

- Using data to provide upward feedback to the School’s senior leadership, including regular reports, while protecting the anonymity of Visitors and maintaining confidentiality.

## **Standards of Practice/Code of Ethics**

The Code of Ethics of the *IOA* sets out four main tenets: independence, informality, impartiality, and confidentiality. **Independence** means that the Office is functionally separate from other administrative offices, including legal and human resources. It reports directly to the Dean and operates according to its own standards of practice. This independence allows and requires the Office to be **informal**: it is not part of any formal administrative or adjudicative structures or processes. It has no power to sanction. The Office is also **impartial**, in that it doesn’t take sides in conflicts. Specifically, it does not advocate for Visitors or participate in any formal university processes. The Office and individual ombudspersons scrupulously avoid situations that would involve or create conflicts of interests or the appearance of such conflicts. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the Office adheres to rigorous rules of **confidentiality**. All communications with Visitors are kept in the strictest confidence. Individual ombudspersons and the Office do not disclose any communications unless given permission by the Visitor to do so. Even the identities of Visitors are kept confidential, unless the Visitor gives permission to make a disclosure and the Office finds compelling reason to do so. The only exception to confidentiality occurs in cases in which there is a legal obligation to do so. **Note that all University of Pittsburgh faculty and staff, including ombudspersons, are “Responsible Employees”**. They are legally obligated to refer all reports of sexual harassment/misconduct to the Office of Civil Rights and Title IX. This will permit the individuals to take advantage of support services and to pursue investigation, however, individuals may accept or decline any/all of these services.

The Office will follow the *IOA*’s [\*Standards of Practice\*](#).

## **Procedures/Operation**

Members of the Office report directly to the Dean. All information shared with the Ombudspersons will remain confidential, barring the exceptions noted above. Ombudspersons will have dedicated email addresses for Office business. Annual reports and other reports made to leadership will be based on anonymized, aggregated, and non-confidential information only.

## **Conflict of Interest**

An ombudsperson will decline to participate in any matter that conflicts with their ability to serve in an impartial, neutral, and independent manner (or in which there is an appearance that this would be the case). In such cases, the Office will make notice to the Visitor and an attempt will be made to assign a different ombudsperson to the case. To avoid potential

conflicts of interest, individuals will not serve on Dietrich School Council or Graduate Council or as *ad hoc* members of promotion committees while they are serving as ombudspersons or for one year following the termination of their position.

### **Jurisdiction/Authority and Limits**

The Office has authority and discretion in handling issues brought to the Office by Visitors. The Office may, at its discretion, initiate inquiries concerning matters when it believes that it is warranted. The Office may access relevant organizational information at its discretion; university offices are expected to comply with requests for such information from the Office in a timely manner. The information received during such inquiries will be held in confidence.

The Office may decline to inquire into a matter or may withdraw from a matter if it believes that involvement would be inappropriate for any reason (e.g., conflict of interest, if the matter is not being brought forward in good faith, or if the matter is a misuse of the Office). In such cases, the Office will make notice to the Visitor (and others, as appropriate). In the event of a conflict of interest, an attempt will be made to assign a different ombudsperson to the case. The Office has sole discretion in determining which information is to be shared with Visitors.

The Office may sometimes require advice from legal counsel to fulfill its obligations. In these instances, the Office can be provided with legal counsel independent from the university if there would be a conflict of interest between the Office and the leadership/administration.

The Office is not authorized to make policy or make changes to policy. It does not engage in formal processes and cannot conduct formal investigations; it cannot adjudicate issues or conflicts. It will not willingly participate in any formal disputes. The Office is not authorized to receive notice for the School or the University of Pittsburgh or to provide notice to the School or the University of Pittsburgh with respect to claims against these entities.

If a Visitor wishes to make an official complaint or put some information formally on record, the Office can assist by providing information to the Visitor regarding the proper procedures for doing so. The Office is not authorized to serve as an advocate for Visitors, nor can it provide legal advice to Visitors. Ombudspersons do not serve as advocates, lawyers, counselors, or representatives.

### **Records/Reporting**

As noted above, the Office may, at its discretion, initiate inquiries concerning matters when it believes that it is warranted. The Office may access relevant organizational information at its discretion; university offices are expected to comply with requests for

such information from the Office in a timely manner. The information received during such inquiries will be held in confidence.

Identified records and case notes will be kept in a secure location only accessible by the person who created them for one month following the closure of a case.

## **Reports**

The Office will issue reports to the Dean every 4 months (i.e., at the end of every semester). Reports will include office statistics (e.g., number of Visitors, divisions and classifications of Visitors), trends over time, systemic issues identified, and descriptions of possible resolutions that have been identified.

## **Evaluation**

The Office will be evaluated using questionnaires distributed by leadership to faculty, staff, postdocs, and graduate students who can provide feedback about their knowledge of and experiences in using its services. This information will be supplemented by self-evaluation reports. Complaints about the Office should be directed to the Dean.

## **Collective Bargaining Agreements**

The Office will not address issues arising under any Collective Bargaining Agreement (“CBA”). If presented with a CBA-covered matter by a member of the bargaining unit, the Office will refer the visitor to the CBA and the union. The Office can provide services to union members, as long as the issues are not covered in the CBA, such as communication issues with co-workers.

## **Amendment/Revocation of Charter**

The charter remains in effect unless revoked. It may be amended only at the agreement of the Office and the Dean.