



How an Ombuds Office Can Serve Women in STEM in Higher Education

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Overview

An organizational ombuds office helps systems to serve women in STEM programs in higher education. The International Ombudsman Association offers detailed information on ombuds office design and implementation, with expert support available to respond to design and implementation questions.

The organizational ombuds role in addressing issues

STEM programs typically focus on research led by professors with the support of graduate students. Access to research and data is based on mentoring and research relationships. The research environment—for undergraduates, graduate students, and post-docs—is a key factor for success. When relationships are clouded by improper behaviors or abuses of authority or lack of supervision, there can be dire consequences for STEM students. STEM opportunities tend to be very specific to the particular research project. When relationships break down, a grad student or post-doc may abandon an entire thread of research and perhaps even abandon the Ph.D. Ombuds can help, off the record, at every stage.

Summary of advantages of an ombuds program in the STEM environment

1. **Zone of safety.** The ombuds approach offers a safe and respectful opportunity for all constituents to explore a wide range of options confidentially, ensuring that “just seeking help” does not cause more damage. The ombuds approach is especially important where people fear even the idea of making a formal complaint—or believe that they “have no options.” The zone of safety is especially important for women and people of color in organizations where they are under-represented. A zone of safety for discussion is also essential for people facing accusations.
2. **The student, postdoc or junior faculty member retains control.** An ombuds offers constituents control over their options under almost all circumstances. Ombuds provide a safe, non-judging environment where both formal and informal approaches can be discussed at length. The ombuds encourages constituents to choose options that work best for them. Having a choice often helps people who feel they have no power to regain some sense of control over their lives.
3. **Consulting an ombuds is voluntary.** No one can be required to consult an ombuds. The voluntary nature of the ombuds model is a first step in helping people regain a sense of control.

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4. **Professional assessment and support.** The ombuds is a trained and experienced professional who can help people to develop and embrace responsible options and approaches. The ombuds is skilled at reality-testing and in educating others about realistic options, alternatives, and approaches. These skills often help to guide individuals into positive directions.
5. **Adaptable options.** The ombuds model is not tied to any one formal or informal process—and offers all available formal as well as informal options in an organization. Ombuds can work informally and with flexibility within a system to help everyone involved in a situation to develop solutions that work. The ombuds can use a spectrum of approaches and tools depending on the situation.
6. **Support to line and staff.** The ombuds works within the system, often consulting to faculty and line managers and as a complement to other staff offices. Organizations that implement an ombuds program often discover that consultations with faculty and management, and appropriate utilization of formal processes, improves because the ombuds can help explain the processes and address concerns that might otherwise inhibit participation.
7. **Restorative justice.** Because the ombuds can use a wide variety of approaches and tools, and works to respect the program users' preferences, the ombuds approach often leads to creative solutions that program users find fit their vision of fairness and restorative justice.
8. **Avoids collateral damage from mandatory reporting.** Extensive research indicates that mandatory reporting can result in psychological harm to already traumatized individuals. Absent safe alternatives, mandatory reporting can inhibit reporting and cause unreported cases to fester.
9. **System monitoring, checks and balances.** Because ombuds are designated as independent and neutral, and serve the entire organization, they often are able gather information about concerns that is not available to others. The ombuds can work quietly, behind the scenes, to alert leadership to potential breakdowns within the system and to help explore options for senior officers. By virtue of extensive experience and breadth of skills, ombuds often become trusted coaches and advisors to top leadership.

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