

The Ombuds Office at Wellesley College

I. Introduction

In 2008 Wellesley College established its first Ombuds Office for the purpose of providing an independent, impartial, neutral and confidential resource for the campus.

II. Scope of services

The Wellesley College Ombuds Office provides a safe and confidential space for faculty, staff and students to discuss any issues related to Wellesley College; an exception exists for matters specifically covered by a union – Wellesley College contract. These services shall in no way replace or be considered a substitute for existing policies or processes. The Wellesley Ombudsperson listens to the visitors' concerns, explores options together with the visitor, and may offer to facilitate the conversations between the parties through means of informal conflict resolution such as shuttle diplomacy, facilitated conversation and/or mediation. Ultimately, the Ombudsperson seeks to help resolve matters in a confidential and impartial manner. In addition, the Ombudsperson provides information on Wellesley's policies and procedures (e.g. how to report a violation of College policy) and refers the visitor to the appropriate designees of the College. The Ombuds Office is a safe and confidential place to discuss any Wellesley College related matters. The College shall provide safety from retaliation to the visitor who chooses to share their concerns with the Ombuds Office.

Participation in the informal conflict resolution processes is always voluntary. The Ombuds Office collects data on trends and identifies ongoing and college-wide trends and issues, without identifying names, positions, departments, etc. of visitors or respondents. Given its unique perspective as an independent, impartial and confidential resource for the entire Wellesley College community, the Ombudsperson provides general feedback to the administration and may make suggestions about possible changes to policies, procedures and/or practices of the College.

The Ombuds Office helps to promote the culture of respectful and civilized behaviors at the College. Through its interventions, it may help to restore trust and communication among the parties to a dispute. The Ombuds Officer would never conduct a formal investigation procedure. The Ombuds Office offers an alternative dispute resolution method to the formal channels.

Furthermore, the Ombuds Office is not a responsible employee under Title IX of the Educational Amendments of 1972 to the 1964 Civil Rights Act (Title IX) and not a campus security authority under The Jeanne Clery Disclosure of Campus Security Policy and Campus Crime Statistics Act (Clery Act). “Responsible employee” and “campus security authority” status are inconsistent with the ombuds’ foundational tenets of independence, neutrality, confidentiality, and informality, and would undermine the Ombuds’ effectiveness. The Ombuds Office is not an office of notice and is not an office of record. Therefore, communication with the Ombudsperson does not provide notice to the College.

III. Guiding principles

The Ombuds Office of Wellesley College is a member of the International Ombudsman Association and adheres to its Standards of Practice and its Code of Ethics. The Ombuds Office reports to the President in a way that is independent of regular reporting structures. To ensure objectivity, the Ombuds Office shall operate independent of the administrative authorities of the College, which includes not disclosing confidential information about matters discussed with the Ombudsperson with anyone at Wellesley College, including the President. Wellesley College shall not request the Ombudsperson to disclose confidential communications or to serve as a witness. The only exception to maintaining confidentiality is when the Ombuds Officer perceives serious risk of imminent harm. The Ombudsperson would only intervene in a matter (e.g. disclose the name of the visitor and/or the specific issue with anyone else) when s/he receives permission from the visitor to discuss the issue with anyone outside of the Ombuds Office.

The Ombuds Officer works informally and does not hold any decision-making power. The Ombuds Office has no authority to adjudicate, change policies or procedures of Wellesley College or to provide legal advice. The Ombuds Office only keeps data on college-wide issues, trends and statistics for the purpose of analyzing and reporting patterns and making recommendations to Wellesley College. The Ombudsperson does not advocate or represent either party in any dispute; s/he has to remain an impartial and neutral third party at all times. The Ombudsperson only advocates for due process and fairness. Everyone from the Wellesley College community who utilizes the services of the Ombuds Office will be considered to abide by these principles.