



### What would you say are some of the biggest challenges you face in your job?

- Expectation management can be challenging! People are often referred or quite literally, sent to the Ombuds. Their call to another office, or staff member is transferred to me. The caller may not be familiar with the word *Ombuds* never mind the role on campus. They've been told that they should speak with the Ombuds. So for example, if the caller is a student or a parent who is disputing a university charge and they're transferred to me – they assume I can simply adjust the bill. I cannot. That can be disappointing for them, so *managing expectation* (explaining what the Ombuds is, how the Ombuds operates, what the Ombuds may do, and what the Ombuds cannot do) is a part of my initial contact with a visitor. It begins with an overview of the role.
- Many people think of Ombuds as an advocate. While Ombuds are often animated by a sense of justice, equity, and fundamental fairness, they are not advocates for individual visitors, but rather for fair, equitably administered processes and procedures. Ombuds can act as an institutional conscience, helping their organization enact its mission, vision, and values so that they are manifest in daily interactions on campus: with policies, what happens when we're waiting in-line or on the phone for service-provision or a resource, or when we need help of some other kind. Ombuds are not combatants who work on behalf of someone who feels wronged or in some way harmed by the institution or its people. Visitors are the actor or agent; they choose what they would like to do. The assistance provided to many individuals is in problem-solving and generating options that the visitor feels comfortable pursuing.

### What is your favorite part of your job?

- This is a position I hoped to hold since first learning of ombudsing as a profession in 1996. I love what I do and the arena in which I do it, even on the most difficult day or work week. I believe in the transformative powers of higher education. And I believe that learning about the individual experience in our institutions is knowledge necessary for its optimal functioning.
- I genuinely enjoy knowing that individual visitors were able to achieve their objectives: whether they sought a specific outcome, wanted to better understand what policy might pertain to their situation or what options might be available to them, or to learn a bit more about their own conflict style and how to resolve a dispute with a colleague or a peer.
- That said, my favorite part of my job, is something I call my professional practices. Each day begins by reciting what I call my oath of practice, comprised of an Ombuds' core values (International Ombuds Association's [Code of Ethics](#)). Each week opens with a focus one of CMU's six Leadership Standards ([Leadership Standards](#)) and ends with a note of appreciation to someone who exhibited that standard in recent partnership or discussion. The practice keeps me where I want to be, nourished by: feeling privileged to serve in this role; remaining grounded by ethics and standards in service to individuals, the institution, and the profession; and appreciating the helpers, my thought-partners on campus.



### **Do you feel that you experience and see campus differently because of your role?**

- Absolutely. There are several different ways one can characterize the role of an organizational ombuds. Most pragmatically, as a strategic thinker or options-generator. More simply, as a guide, coach, or listening ear.
- One of the great benefits of having an organizational ombuds and in structuring it as CMU did beginning November of 2021 is that it yields not only one of the most comprehensive views of faculty, staff, student, and other affiliate concerns, but also how our people sometimes experience our organization. Ombuds' anonymized data and analytics become source of institutional knowledge and that can be used to review, and sometimes improve, processes, protocols, and policies. This invariably shapes how I experience campus.
- I feel that I engage differently with campus, for example, when I attend an event, I'm looking to learn whose in attendance, who is not, why, how might people be experiencing the content, or the space, etc.

### **Do you see a big difference between student, faculty, and staff concerns that come your way?**

- I would say that there is a difference in the specifics or details that attach to each visitor type but if you categorize concerns more broadly, and I do (I use what are called Uniform Reporting Categories) across the visitor-type, concerns often lie primarily within two large categories: *Services/Administrative Issues* and *Evaluative Relationships*. Looking at what falls under these categories, the prevalence of concerns each holds is unsurprising.
- The first includes quality of services; responsiveness and timeliness of service-provision and service providers; as well as administrative decisions, policy interpretation, application of rules, and issuing of penalties.
- The second includes not only issues that arise in evaluative relationships between staff and supervisors, but also between faculty and administrative supervisors, and between students and faculty: grading, for example, is evaluative. The issue types under evaluative relationships also include: priorities, values, beliefs; respect and treatment; trust and integrity; diversity-related; appropriateness of assignments/tasks or duties/schedules; and feedback.

### **Is there a common trend that is brought to your attention often?**

- Discernible trends or patterns normally do come of the caseload, but they can change depending on institutional or national moments. If the question is more focused on a point of commonality across visitor types, no matter "the moment" I would say, a feeling of disempowerment across constituencies. In organizations with distinct constituent-types, especially when someone is experiencing difficulty of some kind, a tendency toward *othering* can occur. Students may think of staff or faculty as unresponsive to their needs and they are able to be that way because of some power or privilege unique to that group. A narrative is built around "the other." Whereas faculty may be frustrated with what they believe students have: the largest number as a single group on campus, and the power of tuition dollars. Each can feel disadvantaged in a power-differentiated relationship, within which, you may be surprised who attribute greater power to whom.