UNIVERSITY SENATE
UNIVERSITY AT ALBANY
STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK

Introduced by: Graduate Academic Council (GAC)

Date: March 14, 2005

IT IS HEREBY PROPOSED THAT THE FOLLOWING BE ADOPTED:

1. That the University Senate approve the following Proposal for the Establishment of an Ombuds Office as approved by the Graduate Academic Council, effective Fall 2005.

2. That this Proposal be forwarded to the President for approval.

Establishment of an Ombuds Office

IT IS HEREBY PROPOSED:

1. That an Ombuds Office be established to serve graduate students.

2. That the Ombuds Office is to act as an independent, confidential, informal, and non-partisan counsel to graduate students on matters related to university experiences. Additionally, the Ombuds Office will provide information about patterns in student issues and problems that may provide insight into the need for review of university policies and procedures.

3. That the Ombuds Office will not be directly involved with any formal grievance process, keep any official records nor accept any official notice.

4. That the Ombuds Office may be used by university graduate students.

5. That the Ombuds Office will consist of an ombudsperson(s) and administrative staff. It will be accessible by confidential phones and e-mails. The office will be located in a discrete location to maximize confidentiality for users of the services.

6. That the Ombudsperson(s) will be a member of the academic community with rank of full professor or professor emeritus at University at Albany.
7. That the Ombudsperson(s) will report to the University Provost. The Provost will appoint the Ombudsperson(s) in consultation with the Dean of Graduate Studies and the University Senate Chair, and ratified by the Ombuds Committee.

8. That the Ombudsperson(s) will create an annual report to describe the services provide to students, the types of issues students sought assistance for, and comments on university policies and procedures that may need review and revision to improve the quality of graduate studies at University at Albany.

9. That an Ombuds Committee will be created to provide counsel to the ombudsperson(s). Members will include the Provost, Chair of the Senate or designee, GAC Chair, Dean of Graduate Studies, University Counsel, Affirmative Action Officer, two faculty members appointed by the GAC and two graduate students appointed by the Graduate Student Organization.
Rationale:

Academic life is complex. The conflicts and issues which often arise in the course of everyday interaction between graduate students and faculty, including advisors, are an inevitable by-product of graduate school. To provide graduate students with a venue in which they can pursue questions and obtain informal counsel on problems that arise, most of our peer- and aspirational peer institutions have established the office of an OMBUDSPERSON designed to act as an independent, confidential, informal, and non-partisan counsel to graduate students who are seeking advice and counsel from a neutral academic.

Several resources are currently available to graduate students seeking assistance. The purpose of the Ombuds Office is to provide an additional resource for students who seek confidential advice and counsel regarding academic issues. It is expected that the Ombuds Office will be familiar with the many resources available to graduate students at the University and be able to refer them, as appropriate.

The specific focus on academic issues and the availability of a respected professor to assist students in problem-solving has been noted as a valuable asset at many of our peer institutions. The functions of an Ombuds Office typically include listening to students’ concerns, providing perspective on issues, assisting students in identifying a variety of options to solve problems, promoting healthy conflict resolution approaches, and providing informal diplomacy between parties where this approach is considered useful to the student involved.

It is important to also fully understand what an Ombuds Office does not do. Typically, ombudspersons do not engage in any formal grievance process, take sides in a dispute, give legal advice, keep official records, or administer sanctions.

As with all new programs, it is important to understand the needed resources. The annual report of the Ombudsperson Office at the University of Iowa (http://www.uiowa.edu/~ooombuds/annrept.htm, accessed March 15, 2005) provides data useful in developing projections. The University of Iowa has approximately 28,000 students in total. In the academic year of 2003-2004, 49 graduate student requests for services were received. Thus, the GAC estimates that a part-time support staff person and a part-time ombudsperson are sufficient, and that yearly evaluation of resources utilized will aid in future planning. Additionally, office space will be needed.

The GAC believes an Ombuds Office will be a valuable addition to the serves available to graduate students. The new resource demands appear proportional to the expected benefits of this service.