

Establishment of an Ombuds Office for Undergraduates¹

IT IS HEREBY PROPOSED:

1. That an Undergraduate Ombuds Office be established to serve undergraduate students.
2. That the Undergraduate Ombuds Office is to act as an informal, independent, confidential, and non-partisan counsel to undergraduate students on matters related to university experiences. Additionally, the Undergraduate 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 Undergraduate Ombuds Office not be directly involved with any formal grievance process.
4. That the Undergraduate Ombuds Office consist of ombudspersons who will be accessible by phone, e-mail, and in person.
5. That the Ombudspersons be tenured or emeriti members of the faculty.
6. That an Undergraduate Ombuds Committee be created to provide counsel to the ombudspersons. Members will include the Provost (or designee), Chair of the Senate (or designee), ULC Chair, Vice Provost for Undergraduate Education, Vice President for Student Success, University Counsel, Affirmative Action Officer, two faculty members appointed by the ULC, one member of the professional staff appointed by the ULC, and two undergraduate students appointed by the undergraduate Student Association.
7. That the Ombudspersons report to the University Provost. The Provost (or designee) will appoint the Ombudspersons for a two-year term in consultation with the Vice Provost for Undergraduate Education, the Vice President for Student Success, and the University Senate Chair, subject to ratification by the Undergraduate Ombuds Committee.
8. That the Ombudspersons prepare a brief annual report to describe the services provided 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 the undergraduate experience at University at Albany, and that the report be submitted to the University Provost and the Chair of the University Senate.

¹ This proposal incorporates language from the bill to establish an Ombuds Office to serve graduates students, modified to pertain to undergraduate students. See University Senate Bill 0405-13.

Rationale:

During the 2004-05 academic year, the University Senate passed legislation on the creation of an Ombuds Office to serve graduate students. The President subsequently signed the legislation, and the Ombuds Office was created. Faculty serving as Ombudspersons have reported favorably on their experiences. The present proposal extends such services to undergraduate students. This bill has been modeled on the legislation for the Graduate Ombuds Office. Much of the rationale for the creation of this Office applies to the experiences of undergraduates as well, and this rationale is presented below in slightly modified form.

Academic life is complex. The conflicts and issues that often arise in the course of everyday interaction between undergraduate students and peers, faculty, or advisors, are an inevitable by-product of the university experience. To provide undergraduate 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 informal, independent, confidential, and non-partisan counsel to students who are seeking advice and counsel from a neutral party.

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

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.

Members of UPC anticipate that a sufficient number of faculty will be willing to volunteer their services as Ombudspersons and thus that this proposal will not entail appreciable resource commitments, other than occasional staff support for scheduling and coordinating meetings.

Members of UPC believe that an Ombuds Office will be a valuable addition to the services available to undergraduate students and that its creation will underscore the University's commitment to enhancing the quality of the undergraduate experience.