

## **GRINNELL COLLEGE OMBUDS OFFICE: OPERATING MANUAL**

This document details the operating policies and procedures for the Grinnell College Ombuds Office and is intended to supplement relevant college policies and guidelines, as well as the Ombuds Office Charter endorsed by the College President and Ombuds, the Code of Ethics and Standards of Practice of the International Ombuds Association (“IOA”), and any applicable law. These policies and procedures will be updated and revised as necessary.

- The Ombuds Office is located in Goodnow Hall 210.
- The office is a confidential, impartial, informal, and independent conflict/dispute management and resolution resource for students, staff, faculty, and other College affiliates.
- The Ombuds seeks to ensure that all members of the community receive fair and equitable treatment within the College.
- The Ombuds is happy to assist in building individual visitor agency and campuswide capacity for civil, compassionate, reasoned, restorative, and collaborative processes.

### **CONFIDENTIALITY and INDEPENDENCE**

Confidentiality and independence are critical characteristics of the office. The Ombuds receives every communication and opens each case with the presumption of confidentiality. The Ombuds will not divulge a visitor's name or the nature of a concern to anyone without the visitor's express consent.

The Ombuds is not an administrative officer of the College and does not report to any administrative office or constituency group in the traditional manner. The Ombuds reports to the Grinnell College President for administrative/budgetary purposes and to share observations gleaned of anonymized, aggregate data regarding emerging trends or patterns of concern.

The office does not create or maintain records on behalf of the College, nor does the Ombuds speak on behalf of the College. Consultation with the Ombuds does not constitute notice to the College of any complaint, grievance, or occurrence. The Ombuds does not testify or otherwise participate in any formal proceedings concerning matters brought in confidence to the office.

### **DUTIES OF THE OMBUDS**

The Ombuds directs the activities of the Ombuds Office. Responsibilities include meeting and consulting with visitors; representing and promoting the activities of the office; developing materials used by the office; maintaining statistical data reflecting office usage; administering the budget and financial affairs of the office; and consulting with and providing feedback to administrators. Feedback may

mean providing information regarding trends, patterns, or systemic concerns and making any appropriate recommendations to leadership and senior management.

## **GENERAL OFFICE PRACTICES**

### Keys and Passwords

The Ombuds Office is kept locked whenever unoccupied. Access to the Ombuds Office voicemail, email, and computer files is protected by passwords selected by the Ombuds. Any handwritten case notes are kept in a locked filing cabinet with the Ombuds having the only key. The cabinet is located in a locked closet, within the office.

### Responding to Inquiries

The Ombuds makes every effort to respond to inquiries and requests for assistance within one business day of receipt. The Ombuds explains and clarifies the established policies and procedures of the College and actively represents the College's commitment to fundamental fairness in its community. The Ombuds does not have the power to override or order changes in rules, regulations, policies, procedures, or the behavior of others, the Ombuds does have an obligation to bring to administrative attention any policies, programs, personnel, or institutional decisions which the Ombuds believes violate the rights of students, faculty, or staff. The Ombuds has access to all information and all individuals in the organization, as permitted by law. Questions concerning reasonably required access will be resolved by College Counsel in consultation with the Ombuds and other appropriate College administration.

### Opening and Closing Cases

A case is opened when a new visitor comes to the Ombuds Office with a concern; or a visitor already consulting with the Ombuds identifies a new and unrelated concern.<sup>1</sup> Any case notes made are destroyed when the Ombuds determines that a visitor's matter has concluded (the case is closed) or two weeks has passed since the last communication from the visitor, whichever is sooner. Notes and other documents, whether obtained by the Ombuds or provided by the visitor, are shredded.

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<sup>1</sup> The term "visitor" refers to any person or group that contacts the Ombuds Office for assistance. This term is used instead of "client," which implies that the office is representing or advocating for the person(s) who contacted the office.

### Handling Anonymous Complaints

Unsolicited and anonymous communications are kept in a discrete folder for one week. If, during that time, the author contacts the office and requests assistance, the case is handled as a new matter. If the author does not contact the office, the communication will be deleted and any notes, destroyed. Unsolicited and anonymous communications remain confidential unless they contain information that indicates a credible likelihood of imminent physical harm. In this situation, the Ombuds will share the substance of the unsolicited and anonymous communication to the appropriate party, e.g., Public Safety and Security, Human Resources, the Dean of Students, etc.

### Calendars

Details of visitor meetings are recorded in neither the electronic calendar system, Microsoft Outlook, nor a physical calendar. To protect confidentiality, visitor meetings are calendared as “appointments” with a case number designation, only. For case-related appointments, the Ombuds will not send an Outlook meeting request and asks that visitors refrain from doing so to arrange for consultations. Administrative meetings or other non-visitor matters calendared in Outlook do include standard information such as meeting title, location, attendees, etc. and Outlook requests are welcomed for these types of appointments.

## **RECORD RETENTION**

### Electronic Records

1. Voice recorded telephone messages are deleted from the system after receipt of (having listened to) the voicemail.
2. A call back or other contact from the Ombuds will standardly occur on the day of receipt, unless the Ombuds is out of the office.
3. All calls are deleted from the telephone call log at the end of each workday.
4. If the Ombuds must leave a voicemail message or speak with a person other than the intended call recipient, they will simply ask that you return a call to 641-269-9399.
5. Messages received by email related to specific cases are deleted immediately after reading.
6. Visitors are discouraged from detailing confidential communication in email messages.
7. The Ombuds may choose to respond to an email by calling, for instance to arrange for an appointment. If using email to communicate, information shared by the Ombuds will be minimal and discreet.
8. The Ombuds Office computer is not backed up to the Cloud. Routine office documents are kept on a secure storage drive accessible only to the Ombuds.
9. An anonymized spreadsheet is utilized (again, securely kept) from which to draw upon aggregated data for report purposes.

## 10. Email sent from the Ombuds Office includes the following disclosure:

Email is not a confidential means of communicating. Please limit electronic communications with the Ombuds to routine business. You are welcome to phone and of course, to visit.

The Office of the Ombuds is a voluntary and informal resource: communication with the Ombuds does not constitute notice to the College.

This message and any attachments are for use solely by the intended recipient. If you have received this email in error, please advise the sender by return e-mail and delete this message.

### Case Materials

Materials related to visitors' cases, whether provided by the visitor or obtained by the Ombuds, are kept securely with any existing case notes. All such materials are destroyed upon case closure.

### Administrative Materials

The Ombuds Office maintains its own administrative records, including budget, marketing, and resource materials.

## **INTERACTIONS WITH VISITORS**

### Grievance Procedures, Disciplinary Process, and Jurisdiction

The Ombuds generally is not involved in the substance of formal appeal procedures but may make inquiries about alleged irregularities in the proceedings. The Ombuds may decline a case when judging intervention inappropriate. The Office of the Ombuds is independent of the college disciplinary process. The Ombuds may choose *but is not required* to take up conflicts with individuals, companies, or organizations falling outside the jurisdiction of the College when the issues involve the College. However, the Ombuds may have limited ability to assist in such cases.

### Visitor Meetings

#### 1. Location:

- The Ombuds may meet with visitors in-person, by telephone, or virtually. Comfort, accessibility, and privacy are critical considerations as is the opportunity to ensure understanding and clarity. Preferences for meeting location/modality will be discussed: in-person meetings are the most frequent as well as the preferred means of connecting.

#### 2. Initial Disclosures:

- At the outset of the initial meeting and before discussing the visitor's concerns, the Ombuds shall reiterate the confidential, impartial, independent, and informal tenets of the Ombuds Office.
- The visitor shall be informed that the Ombuds does not give legal or psychological advice; does not create or keep records; and does not become involved in the substance of formal proceedings or actions.

- The visitor shall be advised that there may be formal remedies available such as grievances, complaints, or legal actions and if the visitor wishes to pursue a formal remedy, the Ombuds will share appropriate office contact information with the visitor.
- The Ombuds will make the visitor aware of available informational resources such as the website, GrinnellShare, and the office brochure.
- In the event of a potential conflict of interest or circumstance reasonably perceived as impugning the Ombuds' impartiality, the Ombuds will disclose the concern to the visitor and suggest alternative resources for their consideration.

### 3. Consultations:

- The structure of a consultation necessarily depends upon the circumstances: including the visitor's emotional state, the urgency of the visitor's situation, and any existing limitations on the Ombuds. It is therefore impossible to predict how conversation will develop and the Ombuds will make every effort to remain flexible, calendar sufficient time, etc.
- The Ombuds generally will begin by encouraging a candid discussion of the visitor's concerns. The Ombuds can be expected to listen deeply, actively, and objectively. When appropriate, the Ombuds will ask questions to elicit salient detail.
- The Ombuds will demonstrate empathy and understanding of the visitor's experience. This is not to be construed as supporting a particular position or advocating for a particular outcome.
- The Ombuds may ask the visitor who else they have consulted and what actions the visitor has already considered.
- Once the visitor has conveyed the significant aspects of their concern, the Ombuds will typically summarize to ensure they have an accurate understanding of the information conveyed.
- The Ombuds will identify and discuss any formal processes available and any applicable College policies, protocols, or rules.
- The Ombuds may explore options for and/or the importance of consulting other professionals and stakeholders to help visitors make informed decisions.
- The Ombuds will discuss the range of potential options and attendant costs and benefits of each.
- The Ombuds will assist the visitor in developing a strategy for resolving the concerns.

### Follow-Up Meetings

Further communications between the Ombuds and visitor may be necessary. Follow-up or inquiry from the Ombuds will be discreet. Unless permission is expressly given, the Ombuds will not identify the office, or disclose substantive

matters in voicemail messages for visitors. The Ombuds also will avoid substantive discussions by email.

The Ombuds is sensitive to the fact that some visitors wish to safeguard their anonymity and when encountering the Ombuds elsewhere on campus or in town, may not acknowledge them. Others may be comfortable openly greeting the Ombuds. Visitors set the tone at any unexpected meeting and the Ombuds can be relied upon to follow along, accordingly.

#### Declining Service or Withdrawing from Matters

If circumstances are such that Ombuds cannot assist with a particular visitor concern, the Ombuds shall promptly disclose the fact and either decline or discontinue service. The Ombuds will suggest any existing resource or process for the visitor.

#### Job Security and Protection of Students

No retaliatory action is to be taken against a student, staff, or faculty member because the individual consulted with the Ombuds Office. Visiting the Ombuds Office should not jeopardize an employee's job security, promotion, tenure, scholarly opportunities, or performance evaluations. Neither should it adversely affect student evaluations, grades, residential, or co-curricular experiences.

#### Release Time from Work

A staff member who requests time to visit the Office of the Ombuds during working hours should not be denied the opportunity to do so and may request time during standard working hours for the initial appointment. For subsequent appointments, employees may need to request additional release time through the Office of the Ombuds. Employees who prefer not to notify their supervisors of their intention to visit the Ombuds Office may make special arrangements for noon, wellness time, or after-hours appointments.

### **INTERACTIONS WITH CAMPUS COMMUNITY**

#### Outreach

To the greatest practicable extent, the Ombuds will attend annual events to promote the mission of the Ombuds Office, including new student orientations, staff and faculty meetings, and new hire receptions. On an on-going basis, the Ombuds may initiate contact with new leadership (student, staff, and faculty) and welcomes inquiry for those wishing to invite the Ombuds to an event.

#### Meetings with Administrators

The Ombuds meets on a regular basis with the College President. In addition, the Ombuds meets with Senior Leadership such as with the Vice President for Academic Affairs and Dean of the College; Vice President of Human Resources; Vice President for Student Affairs; Vice President for Diversity, Equity, and

Inclusion; Chair of the Faculty. The purpose of these meetings will vary but may include feedback and discussions of current campus issues.

#### Keeping the College Community Informed about the Ombuds Office

The Ombuds will prepare an annual report using anonymized, aggregated caseload and office usage data. The report provides an opportunity to identify emerging trends, to share patterns of concern-types, to offer insight into issues meriting administrative attention. The report is not intended to place the College on official notice of any perceived problem or occurrence, nor does it identify visitors who have sought Ombuds services. Annual reports are posted in GrinnellShare after having been submitted to and discussed with the College President.

### **OFFICE USAGE DATA**

At or about the time of the initial meeting with a visitor, as well as throughout the duration of the case, the Ombuds collects anonymized information for the purpose of analysis. The statistical information gathered may include the following: method of contact; repeat or new user; appointment type; self-identification such as gender; constituency; classification of the concern(s); Ombuds services provided; any additional resource information provided; outcome; number of participants; total direct contact hours with visitor(s) and any other participant(s); date closed; and time spent. This data is securely maintained.

### **MISCELLANEOUS POLICIES**

#### Informational Materials

In all print and electronic materials, the Ombuds Office clearly states that its services are confidential, impartial, informal, and independent. Materials note the four ethical principles and include information such as the Ombuds Office not being an office or position able to accept notice, create/maintain institutional records, or participate in formal processes. Links to the Charter, IOA Code of Ethics and Standards of Practice are available on the Ombuds Office website.

#### Office Hours

The Ombuds Office is open throughout the calendar year, and in accordance with the College calendar. The office operates Monday through Friday from 8:00 AM to 5:00 PM. For visitors needing alternatives to standard business hours, time may be available, by arrangement with the Ombuds. The Ombuds will indicate any day-long or longer office closures in outgoing voicemail and out-of-office email greetings.