

The goals of the Ombuds Office are to resolve disputes, discuss and mediate concerns and help participants create options and develop action plans to implement in order to create a healthy, happy, effective, productive, efficient, and competent workplace. The Ombuds Office works to help design a place where people want to come to work, where they trust their leaders, colleagues, direct reports, and university administration; a place that is not stressful or anxiety producing. Everyone should feel valued and be paid fairly. Diversity should be respected, and inclusion encouraged. All these important workplace values are discussed and encouraged. The Ombuds Office follows four tenets:

Neutrality Informality Independence Confidentiality

These help employees resolve conflicts in a non-threatening and unbiased atmosphere and gives each participant new insights and tools to make their workplace the best it can be for the present and the future.

With the multitude of problems brought about by *the large number of interim positions*, particularly in leadership (including the President, Provost and 6 Dean positions and head coaches), and the continued instability in finances, more employees used the Ombuds office than in prior years.

Between July 2021-August 2023 the Ombuds Office saw approximately 275 faculty, administration, and staff members. The majority of people were from the Belknap Campus with roughly 70 participants from the Health Sciences Campus (HSC). Eleven of the twelve schools and colleges were represented. Over this time, ten trends emerged. They are the following and are ranked in order of most represented to least:

- I. Increased feelings of stress resulting from real or perceived lack of leadership:
 - a. Feelings that there is no one in charge-too many interim positions
 - b. Believe decisions are not made with knowledge of jobs, departmental policies or, when appropriate, as a team
 - c. More “good ole boy/girl” systems than in prior years
 - d. Feelings of hopelessness
 - e. Lack of strong and insightful leadership/abuse of power
 - f. Looking backwards instead of forwards

- II. Lack of respect and empathy for colleagues:*
 - a. **Fear of retribution**
 - b. Isolation factors in work related challenges
 - c. Poor listening behaviors
 - d. Lack of civility and courtesy when answering emails, texts or phone calls
 - e. Lack of accountability
 - f. Inability or **lack of desire** to change

- III. Communication Issues:*
 - a. Poor skills-
 - i. Active listening (listening and checking for INTENT of message)
 - ii. Appropriate wording

- iii. Controlling emotions while speaking
 - iv. Inability to understand differences such as cultures, barriers, personal challenges, differences in how people work (i.e., extroverts and introverts, time of day people are most productive, etc.), gender, etc.
 - v. Not willing to encourage open communication even in difficult situations
 - b. Work style differences more pronounced and concerns over favoritism
- IV. Budgetary Issues:*
 - a. Temporary decrease in pay and lack of raises (compensation study will hopefully help this)
 - b. Dwindling resources for teaching and/or research, hiring new staff (continue to increase workload because of lack of sufficient staff)
 - c. Burnout on all levels
 - d. Lack of professional opportunities because of limited travel, online conferences, and number of opportunities.
- V. Noticeable increase of people of color and women utilizing the Ombuds' office:
 - a. An increase in concerns on lack of ability to move to leadership positions or to receive promotions
 - b. Great deal of mistrust between diverse colleagues
- VI. Hierarchical/Power Issues:*
 - a. Power discrepancies between senior-junior faculty, faculty-staff, supervisor-staff, administration-faculty and staff, and all configurations of these groups oftentimes create inappropriate and rude behaviors
 - b. Fear of retaliation for expressing concerns and conflicts
 - c. Gender and other diversity situations
- VII. Policy and Procedure Issues:
 - a. Lack of knowledge, communicating or enhancing policies and procedures to clarify expectations and professional behavior. Need overarching policies for all colleges, schools and departments at university (Dr. Schatzel addressed this)
 - b. No or little orientation or explanation of policies and procedures for employees (particularly new hires) in individual departments
 - c. Lack of consistency (especially in some evaluation procedures) in implementation. (b. and c. are hopefully being addressed in the new onboarding programs)
- VIII. Poorly trained supervisors:*
 - a. Training needed over a long period of time (perhaps first year in supervisory role)-many people are promoted to supervisor and go from colleague to boss. Without training on how to transition from colleague to supervisor, the department can become chaotic and may lose valuable workers. This is particularly true for annual evaluations.
 - b. Need accountability for supervisors/managers/leaders

- IX. Difficult Work Environment: *
 - a. Civility an issue
 - b. Negative, discounting and/or aggressive interactions (which are more numerous online) are difficult to deal with especially when hierarchical positions are at play
 - c. Feeling mentally and physically unsafe

- X. Lack of Positive Recognition: *
 - a. Encouragement of professional development and advancement
 - b. Recognition within department or school/college
 - c. Need to receive input to show appreciation for excellent work

All these concerns and issues, if not addressed, create more severe conflicts. Some, if not most, of the above concerns are addressed in the new strategic plan. Many of these issues are continuing from previous years (*). The Ombuds Office is working to resolve all issues to help make the on and off campus work environment as positive and productive as possible. If these concerns are not addressed, the university will continue to lose dedicated employees along with a tarnished reputation locally and nationally.

The positive news is we have a new President that has the experience and commitment that U of L needs and through her listening sessions has addressed many of the above concerns; new deans for several colleges and schools that will stabilize and start fixing their challenges and new employees in every department across the entire university that will start changing the attitude and outlook to create a more positive and productive workplace for all.