

Robert Holland Faculty Senate (RHFS) resolution in support of the Office of the Ombudsman

Proposed by Senators **Matthew W. Priddy** (BCoE) and **Stacy Haynes** (A&S)

At the November 2023 meeting of the RHFS, President Keenum shared with the Faculty Senate that there are plans to restructure the Ombuds Office¹, which will eliminate the Ombuds Office in its current form. Details were not provided about a specific timeline, but Faculty Senate was informed by Provost David Shaw in the same meeting that the offices of Title IX, HRM, and MSU Legal were being consulted about a plan of action.

WHEREAS, the MSU Ombudsperson position has previously been held by a member of the MSU faculty and the position “serves as a neutral resource providing confidential and informal assistance to members of the campus community.”

Purpose & Authority

The MSU Ombudsman serves as a neutral resource providing confidential and informal assistance to members of the campus community. The Ombuds Office was established to provide a confidential, neutral resource for staff and faculty, to express concerns, identify options to address workplace conflicts, facilitate productive communication, and surface responsible concerns regarding university policies and practices.

Contact the Office of the Ombuds at any point during an issue when a confidential conversation or source of information may be needed. The Ombuds will listen to your concerns, give you information about University policies, help you evaluate your situation, and assist you in making plans to address the issue or conflict. You control the process and decide which course of action to take. Contacting the Ombuds Office is completely voluntary and you choose the course of action that is best suited to your interests.

Although the Ombuds do not have the power to change University rules or policies, they can make recommendations for change to those with the authority to implement them. Often the Ombuds recommendations are based on perceived trends. While the Ombuds does not keep records of specific complaints or problems, the Office does keep track of general statistical patterns and brings concerns to the attention to those with the authority to make institutional improvements. These data may signal emerging issues, indicate new trends, highlight vulnerable groups of employees, or suggest areas of improvement. The data collection never includes details that could identify individuals' confidential information.

The Ombuds has the authority to:

Contact senior officers of the University

Gather information in the course of looking into a problem

Mediate or negotiate settlements to disputes

Bring concerns to the attention of those in authority

Attempt to expedite administrative processes

Figure 1. Screenshot from MSU Ombuds website¹.

WHEREAS, peer institutions may have multiple ombudspersons who are elected by university faculty and serve overlapping terms² or have individual ombudspersons who serve specific constituent groups (e.g., faculty, staff, or students)³. Both systems seek to serve the constituents of the university in quick and impartial conflict resolution. Additionally, ombudspersons are recommended to report directly to the University President's office, thus minimizing any appearance of serving a specific office or constituency⁴.

WHEREAS, the elimination of the MSU Ombuds Office can be viewed as a deterioration of conflict resolution for faculty and other members of the MSU community. While the rationale for eliminating the Ombuds Office may have been duplication of effort (e.g., multiple campus units performing the same duties), the Ombuds Office is unique in its ability to understand faculty issues and the discretion it provides. The Ombuds Office has traditionally been occupied by an MSU faculty member, which facilitates impartiality and, coupled with their extensive university policy knowledge, cannot be recreated by other departments on MSU's campus.

THEREFORE BE IT

RESOLVED,

that the Robert Holland Faculty Senate advises the University President to

- (i) take immediate corrective action to reinstate the Ombuds Office,
- (ii) work with Faculty Senate to determine an election cycle/protocol for MSU faculty member(s) to serve as the MSU ombudsperson
- (iii) explore the possibility of expanding the office to include multiple ombudspersons

References

¹<https://www.ombuds.msstate.edu/>

²<https://facultysenate.ua.edu/2023-24-ombudspersons/>

³<https://news.clemson.edu/gov-mcmaster-proclaims-oct-12-as-ombuds-day-learn-more-about-the-clemson-ombuds-office/>

⁴<https://www.ombudsassociation.org/assets/docs/Nuts-and-Bolts-for-Establishing-a-New-Ombudsman-Office.pdf>

To the Mississippi State University Faculty Senate,

Please find this letter of support from the Graduate Student Associate regarding the existence of the office of Ombudsman. We believe it necessary to have this office to support both faculty and graduate students in resolving issues. Current university policy AOP 12.37: Graduate Student Academic Grievance Procedures is the official channel for graduate student academic complaints which requires making the complaint public with sufficient evidence to have any resolution. There are many nuanced and unpredictable social situations that could be more easily resolved through a confidential, neutral third party, and the university administration should not be limiting a graduate student's ability to receive confidential council on the issues they might face in their time at Mississippi State University. We recommend the return and continuance of the office of Ombudsman to better insure graduate student welfare.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Luke Tucker". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Luke Jackson Tucker

Graduate Student Association President 2023-2024