

**DECLARATION OF BEST PRACTICES FOR
UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA OMBUDS OFFICES
(Updated May 2026)**

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I. Introduction and Background

The University of California (“UC”) recognizes the value of an Ombuds by establishing Ombuds Offices at every UC campus and the UC Office of the President¹. Each Ombuds Office serves as a resource that provides confidential, impartial, informal and independent dispute resolution and mediation services to its community.² Key benefits include improving workplace culture, identifying and addressing systemic issues, and empowering individuals by offering a confidential place to be heard and explore options for resolution. By offering guidance and facilitating communication, Ombuds Offices can promote fairness, build trust, and help organizations function more effectively.

Credibility is essential to the long-term effectiveness of an Ombuds Office. The Office serves a critical insider/outsider function. Offices are expected to have deep insight into the organization’s structure and function, culture and policies, and maintain institutional knowledge to assist community members navigating thorny challenges.

This document defines and clarifies a common set of standards and best practices in the organizational ombuds field as they apply within the context of the University of California Ombuds Offices. This document is consistent with and expands upon the International Ombuds Association (“IOA”) Code of Ethics and Standards of Practice and incorporates the collective wisdom and collaboration among the internally established UC Ombuds Offices. We recognize that each campus and Ombuds Office operates independently of one another, but together, the UC Ombuds agree on these Best Practices.³

The intent of this document is to: (1) articulate UC Ombuds best professional practices, principles and standards; (2) educate the University community about the role of the Ombuds Offices; (3) encourage the campus communities to use the term “Ombuds” and “Ombuds Office” to refer only to those Offices within the UC System which subscribe to the longstanding

¹ The campuses consist of UC Berkeley, UC Davis, UC Irvine, UCLA, UC Merced, UC Office of the President, UC Riverside, UC San Diego, UC San Francisco, UC Santa Barbara, UC Santa Cruz, and include their various centers and locations (including hospitals, affiliated enterprises and distance sites). This document will use the term “campuses” to refer to these various entities.

² In accordance with the California Mediation Act (California Evidence Code Sections, 1115-1128), UC Ombuds are neutrals who meet the definition of mediators and whose communications with visitors are for the purpose of initiating, considering, or reconvening a mediation or retaining the Ombuds, and thus assert the mediator’s privilege for all communications with visitors. Additionally, UC Ombuds assert that all communications with their offices are made with the expectation of confidentiality and are therefore entitled to a privilege under the California State Constitution. By providing visitors with a confidential reporting mechanism, Ombuds Offices also assist the University in meeting the important public objectives set forth in the Federal Sentencing Guidelines and the Sarbanes-Oxley Act.

³ The original version of this document, written November 6, 2006, was the result of collaboration and input from representatives from all UC Ombuds offices in existence at the time: UC Berkeley; UC Irvine; UC Los Angeles; UC Riverside; UC San Diego; UC Santa Barbara; UC Santa Cruz; Los Alamos National Laboratory; and Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory. The second version of this document, revised and endorsed in April 2017, was the result of collaboration and input from representatives of all the (then) current UC Ombuds Offices: UC Berkeley; UC Davis; UC Irvine; UC Los Angeles; UC Merced; UC Riverside; UC San Diego; UC San Francisco; and UC Santa Barbara.

professional tenets outlined in this document; and (4) encourage all UC Ombuds Offices and the administrations that oversee them to operate in a manner consistent with the field's professional standards and codes of ethics, as well as these best practices.

II. Purpose and Scope of the Ombuds Offices

Ombuds Offices are places where members of University of California communities⁴ and designated individuals can seek guidance to address concerns related to the University, through a resource that is confidential, informal, independent, and impartial.

The Ombuds Offices at the University of California campuses provide consultation to help evaluate options and suggest approaches for addressing concerns, provide information on processes and policies for formal and informal resolution, serve as a sounding board, and facilitate communication through informal dispute resolution and mediation services to aggrieved parties, including faculty, academic personnel, administrators, staff, students, and others with University-related concerns. The specific scope of each Ombuds Office is defined in its local charter, job descriptions, and/or Ombuds Office procedures.

Ombuds practitioners may do the following: listen, make informal inquiries or otherwise review matters received, offer options, make referrals, and facilitate resolutions independently and impartially. In addition, each Ombuds Office serves as an information and communication resource, consultant, dispute resolution expert, and catalyst for institutional change for its campus.

Ombuds Offices do not replace other processes at the University. The Ombuds Offices work to facilitate communication and assist parties in reaching mutually acceptable, fair, and equitable resolutions that are consistent with the mission and ideals of the University. Ombuds Offices also report general trends and provide feedback in the form of suggestions, reflections, and options; these recommendations are non-binding and are based on deep knowledge of the University. Ombuds can also advocate for systemic change when appropriate without disclosing confidential communications.

III. Ombuds Office Structure

The Ombuds Office should be recognized as an empowered Office with strong institutional endorsement and access to organizational leadership and administrators at every campus level, including the Chancellor. Simultaneously, it must operate with sufficient independence to be recognized that it does not act on behalf of or represent the University and is not another arm of the administration.

Each campus should have a well-resourced and well-staffed Ombuds Office headed by the Ombuds, to whom the rest of the Ombuds Office staff report. The Office's organizational structure, reporting structure, and employment model should communicate to campus constituents that senior leadership values and empowers the Office and trusts it to operate independently.

⁴ Members of the UC Community served by the Ombuds Offices include not only students, staff, faculty, and administrators but also collaborators, community members and alumni – but do not include patients of the UC Health system.

The “Ombuds Office” consists of everyone who works in the Ombuds Office, including the Ombuds, other ombuds practitioners, and support staff. The “Ombuds,” also sometimes called the “Ombuds Director,”⁵ is a University employee designated to oversee and provide independent leadership of the Office.⁶ The term “ombuds”⁷ may also refer to practitioners within the office who provide ombuds services and manage their own caseloads under the Ombuds’ supervision. The Ombuds is a person, not a business.

The terms “Ombuds” should be used exclusively in relation to Offices that operate in accordance with the best practices outlined in this document and have been officially recognized as the Ombuds Office by the Chancellor or President for that campus.

All internal constituents, including faculty, staff, students, and trainees should have access to an Ombuds Office.

A. Reporting Relationship

The Ombuds should report to a single point of contact at the highest level of senior leadership within the organization needed to ensure the Office’s independence and impartiality and to safeguard the Office from the influences or pressures of organizational functions. Each Ombuds, in consultation with its campus, should determine appropriate mechanisms for accountability. The leader to whom the Ombuds reports should support the Ombuds Office’s adherence to these best practices. The reporting relationship should only be for administrative and budgetary purposes and not for any information regarding the content of confidential meetings. Staff within the Ombuds Office should not report to any external third party.

B. Selection of the Ombuds

One individual should be selected to serve as the Ombuds. The selection of the Ombuds is particularly important because the Ombuds exercises significant independent authority and discretion over the Ombuds Office, including hiring and supervising all other practicing ombuds and staff in their Office. To maintain competent and credible Ombuds Offices, the campuses must select the Ombuds with consideration of the knowledge, skills, and abilities necessary to perform the duties effectively with care.

It is essential that the Ombuds be a dedicated employee of the organization whose primary professional allegiance is to the institution/campus Ombuds Office. The Ombuds must be actively engaged in working with visitors and interacting with leadership on multiple levels. The organization gains the most value when the Ombuds is able to draw on the institutional knowledge and understanding of organizational culture which comes from the day-to-day interactions of being an employee of the Institution and providing direct service.

All Ombuds should be salaried, career employees hired through an open and fair process with input from relevant constituent groups. The selection of the Ombuds should involve significant engagement from relevant campus stakeholders. The leaders selecting an Ombuds are encouraged to consult with other Ombuds from comparable Ombuds Offices during the search

⁵ Alternate titles include “The Ombuds,” “University Ombuds,” “Ombuds and Director,” or “UC Ombuds.”

⁶ The terms Ombudsman or Ombudsperson are also sometimes used. Ombudsman is the original Swedish word, which some believe to be gender-neutral.

⁷ Alternate titles include “Associate Ombuds” or “Assistant Ombuds.”

process. The Ombuds should not serve another role at the University that would compromise the independence of the Ombuds Office.

We encourage campuses to work with their Ombuds on an interim coverage plan in the case of vacancy or leaves, to promote leadership continuity and consistent services. For the purpose of stability and credibility, lengthy interim and contractual appointments for the Ombuds are discouraged. If the Ombuds takes extended leave or departs the position, it is recommended that the campus appoint an acting or interim Ombuds, until the Ombuds returns or a new, permanent Ombuds is hired as a University employee. Ideally, an acting or interim Ombuds would come from within the Ombuds Office. However, if there is no appropriate candidate within the Office, a qualified candidate on a short-term, limited contract would be desirable. This should be an individual and not a company; according to Regent's Policy 5402, "UC MUST VALUE AND PROTECT ITS EMPLOYEES: The University shall prioritize the use of its employees to perform functions and services whenever possible and the use of outside contractors will not cause or facilitate the displacement of University employees."

Campuses are strongly discouraged from temporarily selecting existing UC career staff who work outside the UC Ombuds Offices to assume an interim role in the Ombuds Office, as this could create confidentiality-related concerns when that individual returns to their regular duties, and could challenge the perception of the independence of the Ombuds Office.

C. Conflicts of Interest or Commitment

Ombuds Office staff should have no collateral duties either inside or outside the University of California, which would interfere with their ombuds-related duties or create a conflict of interest or commitment with their role in the Ombuds Office.

1. Internal Conflicts of Interest

Ombuds Office staff should avoid operating in other roles on campus outside their ombuds job functions, particularly if these roles involve activities that could be perceived as acting on behalf of the University or could be seen as creating a conflict of interest with their duties in the Ombuds Office. In addition, internal conflicts may arise if any staff in the Ombuds Office performs in a dual role which requires mandated reporting, as it can compromise the confidentiality and independence of the Ombuds Office.

2. External Conflicts of Interest

Outside professional activities, personal financial interests, or acceptance of benefits from third parties may present actual or perceived conflicts with the mission of the Ombuds Office and an individual's private interests. While Ombuds Office staff may engage in professional or personal activities outside of work on their own time, it is important that such activities do not interfere with their UC ombuds duties. To help uphold the integrity of the Ombuds Office, staff should proactively disclose relevant professional financial interests in compliance with applicable UC policies and procedures relating to conflicts of interest and conflicts of commitment. In all matters, Ombuds Office staff should take appropriate steps, including consultation with the Ombuds and/or local compliance officers, if the appropriate course of action is unclear, to avoid actual or perceived conflicts of interest.

The Ombuds should be involved in the day-to-day operations of the Ombuds Office and should not delegate or subcontract this oversight, except when on approved leave.

D. Internal Office Structure & Staffing

The Ombuds is vested with the authority and discretion over how to exercise the independence of the Office and is accountable for ensuring that all Ombuds Office staff preserve confidentiality and adhere to ethical principles and standards. Further, the Ombuds manages the Office and should have authority over hiring and training staff and other operational decisions within the Office.

Staffing vacancies within the Ombuds Office may be filled by contractual positions temporarily, but they should ideally be filled with permanent employees as soon as possible. Time-limited, contractual arrangements, except as a short-term and interim solution, undermine the integrity of the ombuds function by making Ombuds Office staff more vulnerable than the public career employees who are utilizing the Office. Ombuds Office staff deal with highly sensitive concerns and must be able to act without fear that acting independently or speaking out will jeopardize their jobs. They should have at least as much job security as other public career employees.

To fulfill their functions, the Ombuds Offices should each have a specific allocated budget, adequate space, and sufficient staffing and other resources to perform their duties which include: consulting with visitors⁸; meeting regularly with leaders and administrators; mediating and facilitating conversations; writing reports; designing and delivering workshops, trainings or presentations; serving as a non-voting advisory member on relevant committees; planning and completing administrative tasks; and participating in professional development.

No Ombuds Office staff (except the Ombuds) should report to anyone outside the Ombuds Office.

IV. Principles of Practice

The Ombuds Offices adhere to the International Ombuds Association Standards of Practice and Code of Ethics. These documents delineate minimum practices, and the UC Ombuds Offices strive to operate to “best practices” and to manage the Ombuds Offices in a way that serves both the best interests of the University of California and the best interests of the communities the Ombuds Offices serve. Each Office takes appropriate steps to make this Declaration of Best Practices and the tenets of best practices of the organizational ombuds field available to the University community.

A. Independence

The Ombuds Offices are and must appear to be free from interference in the legitimate performance of their duties. This independence is achieved primarily through organizational recognition, reporting structure, and impartiality. To ensure objectivity, the Ombuds Offices should operate independently of administrative authorities. The Ombuds Offices and their staff should also be independent from any entities external to the University, such as donors, vendors, contractors and funding authorities. The Ombuds Office should report administratively to the highest level of senior leadership within the organization needed to ensure the Office’s independence and impartiality and to safeguard the Office from the influences or pressures of other organizational functions. Examples of common reporting options include the Provost, Chancellor, or Chief of Staff to the Chancellor. The Ombuds should have the authority to hire,

⁸ A “visitor” is a person who comes to the Ombuds Office seeking confidential assistance.

train, and supervise the staff members of the Ombuds Office. In all cases, the Ombuds should have access to all administrators, up to and including the Chancellor.

Ombuds Office staff deal with highly sensitive concerns and must be able to act with confidence. Ombuds staff cannot be retaliated against for performing their duties.

B. Confidentiality

The Ombuds Offices do not disclose nor should they be required to disclose any information provided in confidence, except to address an imminent risk of serious harm or to defend against a charge of professional misconduct or malpractice. The Ombuds Offices do not confirm the identity of visitors and their issues, do not confirm communication with any visitor nor disclose any confidential information without the visitor's express permission provided in the course of discussions with the Ombuds Office and at the discretion of the Ombuds Office. By using the Ombuds Office, the visitor agrees that any communications with the Ombuds Office are confidential and that they will not call any of the Ombuds Office staff as witnesses in legal or other formal proceedings with respect to confidential communications. The Ombuds Offices object to participation in any process inside or outside the University in which they would be compelled to disclose confidential communications. These agreements for using the Ombuds Office are stated clearly on each Office's website, email signature line, literature, and opening conversations.

C. Impartiality

The Ombuds Offices consider the interests and concerns of all participants involved in a situation impartially, look for appropriate opportunities to facilitate communication, and assist the participants in identifying goals, exploring skills and/or reaching mutually acceptable agreements. The Ombuds Offices may advocate for fair and equitably administered processes. However, the Ombuds Offices do not advocate for any individual, group, or entity in any conflict or dispute. Ombuds Office staff avoid any conflict of interest or perceived conflict of interest with any individual or entity, either internal or external to the organization.

D. Informality

The Ombuds Offices are a resource for informal dispute resolution. Ombuds Offices do not investigate, arbitrate, adjudicate, or in any other way participate in any internal or external formal process or action. The Ombuds Offices do not create or keep records related to their cases for the University.

V. Authority and Limits of the Ombuds Offices

Specific areas of authority and limitations on the authority of the Ombuds Offices are listed below and are also delineated in their local charters, job descriptions, and/or Ombuds Office procedures:

A. Authority of the Ombuds Offices

The authority of the Ombuds Offices derives from the administration at the individual campuses in which the Office is located and should come from the Chancellor.

The Ombuds Offices are entitled to inquire about any issue concerning the University that affects any member of the University community. Members of the Ombuds Office have access to all campus records and personnel for the purpose of fulfilling their duties. They have the authority to break confidentiality if they believe there is an imminent risk of serious harm. Additionally, ombuds practitioners can break confidentiality in order to defend against claims of misconduct or malpractice or misconduct on the part of the visitor during an interaction with the ombuds practitioner.

The Ombuds Offices may, without having received a specific complaint from a member of the University community, inquire about matters which the Ombuds Office believe warrant attention.

The Ombuds Offices may decline to inquire into a matter or may withdraw from a case if the Ombuds believes involvement is inappropriate for any reason, including matters not brought in good faith, or which appear to be a misuse of the ombuds function.

The Ombuds Offices have the authority to explore a range of options available to the visitor, including both informal and formal processes.

The Ombuds Offices may require legal or other professional advice from time to time in order to fulfill their required functions. The Ombuds Offices should be provided legal counsel independent from the University in the event they are asked for documents or testimony related to any litigation or other formal process, or when any other conflict of interest arises between the Ombuds Office and the administration or the University.

Ombuds practitioners may elect to serve on system-wide and campus committees, task forces or working groups. Ombuds practitioners have the discretion to participate in an advisory or non-voting capacity, or to decline participation altogether. When determining their participation in such groups, Ombuds practitioners strive to avoid any actual or perceived conflicts of interest, recognizing that someone may later object to the actions or work product of the group and seek out the impartial assistance of the Ombuds Office. Ombuds practitioners do not participate as decision-makers in developing University policies or processes.

B. Limitations on the Authority of the Ombuds Offices

1. Receiving Notice for the University

Ombuds Office staff, including the Ombuds, do not have the authority or the duty to take action or respond to particular issues on behalf of the Institution, nor are they authorized to receive notice on behalf of the University. The Ombuds Offices publicize their non-notice role to the University community. This includes notice of allegations that may be perceived to be violations of laws, regulations or policies, including, but not limited to, sexual violence and sexual harassment, issues covered by the Whistleblower policy, or incidents subject to reporting under the Clery Act. Because the Ombuds Office does not function as an Office of Notice for the University, even if the Ombuds Office becomes aware of such allegations, the Ombuds Office is not required to report them to the University. If a visitor would like to put the University on notice regarding a specific situation or wishes for information to be provided to the University, the Ombuds Office will provide the visitor with information so that the visitor may do so themselves.

2. Collective Bargaining Agreements

The Ombuds Offices do not address any issues pertaining to the terms and conditions of a collective bargaining agreement (“CBA”), unless allowed by specific language in the CBA or by ad hoc agreement. Ombuds practitioners nevertheless retain the authority to decline to be involved in any individual case. This means that while the Ombuds Offices may serve union members, the Ombuds office does not address issues that are covered in the CBA, including, but not limited to, issues such as grievable claims for termination of employment or formal discipline. In those cases, the Ombuds Offices refer these employees to the CBAs and their union representatives.

Ombuds practitioners do not represent employees or serve as advocates. The Ombuds Offices may work with union members regarding all issues not covered by the contracts, such as communication or workstyle issues.

3. Formal Processes and Investigations

The Ombuds Offices do not conduct formal investigations. They object to participation in formal dispute processes or outside agency complaints or lawsuits, either on behalf of a visitor to the Ombuds Office or on behalf of the University. Because the expectation of confidentiality from visitors and the campus community is critically important to the integrity and viability of Ombuds Offices, members of the Ombuds Office object to requests or directives to testify as a witness or to produce documents to reveal confidential communications in any formal or legal proceeding. The Ombuds Offices provide an alternate channel for informal dispute resolution, and all use of the Ombuds Office is voluntary.

4. Record Keeping

The Ombuds Offices do not create or maintain documents or records for the University about individual cases. Notes, if any, taken during the course of working on a case should be routinely destroyed at regular intervals to be specified in the Office charter and/or Ombuds Office procedures. All materials related to a case are maintained in a secure location and manner and are destroyed once the case is concluded. The Ombuds Office may maintain anonymous statistical data to assist the Ombuds in assessing issues, reporting trends, and giving feedback.

5. Advocacy for Parties

The Ombuds Offices do not act as an advocate for any party in a dispute, nor do they represent University administration or visitors to their Office.

6. Adjudication of Issues

The Ombuds Offices do not have authority to adjudicate, impose remedies or sanctions, or to enforce or change policies or rules.

7. Conflict of Interest

Ombuds practitioners should avoid involvement in cases where there may be a conflict of interest. A conflict of interest occurs when any ombuds’ private interests, real or perceived, supersede or compete with their dedication to the impartial and independent nature of the role of the Ombuds Office. When an ombuds practitioner becomes aware of a real or perceived

conflict, the ombuds practitioner should take steps necessary to disclose and/or avoid the conflict.

VI. Retaliation for Using the Ombuds Office

All members of the constituencies served by the Ombuds Offices should have the right to consult the Ombuds Office without reprisal. Ombuds work to ensure their institutions protect visitors from reprisals.

VII. Revisions of this Document

This document articulates current best practices for the UC Ombuds based on the collective expertise of the UC Ombuds professionals. It may be revised as needed by the UC Ombuds Offices.