

Howard University Faculty Ombuds Charter

Introduction

The Office of the Faculty Ombuds at Howard University was established to provide confidential, neutral, informal, and independent assistance to faculty members, including those in administrative roles with faculty retreat rights, in resolving conflicts and addressing concerns related to their relationship with Howard University. This Charter outlines the principles, standards, and operational guidelines for the Office, aligning with the Howard University Faculty Handbook, the Standards of Practice and Code of Ethics of the International Ombuds Association (IOA), and the Howard University Strategic Plan.

Mission

The mission of the Office of the Faculty Ombuds is to support a fair and equitable academic environment by offering confidential and impartial conflict resolution services, fostering open communication, and promoting the principles of fairness and respect within the Howard University community. The Faculty Ombuds serves to augment, but not replace, formal processes by offering faculty and administrators opportunities to resolve issues and conflicts informally. The Ombuds provides a confidential, neutral, and independent resource to help preserve relationships, professionalism, and collegiality whenever possible. By facilitating informal resolution, the Ombuds aims to address concerns early and constructively, thereby complementing Howard's formal mechanisms for dispute resolution and disciplinary actions.

Scope of Services

The Office of the Faculty Ombuds provides the following services:

- **Confidential Consultation:** Offering a safe space for faculty to discuss concerns and explore options for resolution.
- **Conflict Resolution:** Facilitating informal mediation and conflict resolution processes.
- **Coaching and Skill Development:** Coaching faculty on conflict resolution and communication skills.
- **Facilitated Discussions:** Facilitating structured discussions to resolve conflicts.
- **Shuttle Diplomacy:** Acting as an intermediary between parties unwilling or unable to meet face-to-face.
- **Information and Referral:** Providing information about university policies and procedures and referring individuals to appropriate resources.

- **Trend Identification:** Identifying and reporting systemic issues and trends to university leadership while maintaining confidentiality.

Principles

The Office of the Faculty Ombuds operates under the following principles, derived from the IOA Standards of Practice and Code of Ethics:

- **Independence:** The Ombuds Office operates independently from other Howard University entities, ensuring unbiased and autonomous functioning. The University will not attempt to direct or influence the substantive work of the Ombuds Office as it provides ombuds services to constituents, including determining with whom the Ombuds meets and directing how Ombuds manage any given concern.
- **Neutrality and Impartiality:** The Ombuds is a neutral party, advocating for fair processes rather than for individuals. The Ombuds will strive for impartiality and fairness in consideration of all visitors to the Office and the issues they raise. The Ombuds will avoid involvement in any matter in which their private interests, real or perceived, may conflict with their ability to be truly impartial and independent in their role.
- **Confidentiality:** All communications with the Ombuds are confidential, except in cases of imminent risk of serious harm. Thus, the Ombuds is not considered a “Responsible Employee” under the University’s Title IX policy. The Ombuds will hold all communications in strict confidence and will not reveal - and must not be required to reveal - the identity of visitors to the Ombuds Office unless it either possesses the visitor’s consent to reveal this information or the disclosure is legally required of the Ombuds Office.
- **Informality:** The Ombuds provides informal assistance and does not participate in formal investigations, disciplinary discussions between administration and faculty, FGC appeals/grievances, or other types of adjudications. The Ombuds will be a resource for informal dispute resolution and problem-solving services only.

Operational Guidelines

- **Access and Reporting:** The Ombuds has access to all relevant information and individuals within the University, as permitted by law, and reports directly to the President of the University to ensure independence. The Ombuds also maintains regular contact with the Chair of the University’s Faculty Senate and the Provost and Chief Academic Officer to share anonymized trends and observations.
- **Record Keeping:** The Office does not keep formal records of confidential communications. Any notes or materials are securely maintained and regularly

destroyed to protect confidentiality. The Ombuds Office record-keeping system for confidential information will be independent of the organization's technology system, with access allowed only to Ombuds Office personnel. Also, this Office's confidential records are not subject to the University's Record Retention and Destruction Policy.

- **Communication:** The Ombuds communicates trends and systemic issues to University leadership without breaching confidentiality. The Ombuds will prepare any data or reports to be shared with the University or otherwise made public in ways that protect visitor confidentiality.
- **Training and Outreach:** The Office conducts regular training and outreach to educate the faculty about its services and the principles of effective conflict resolution.
- **Budgetary Independence:** The Ombuds Office shall maintain budgetary independence to uphold its impartiality and autonomy. The budget for the Ombuds Office will be determined annually by the Office of the President and the Office of the Provost, ensuring that the Ombuds can operate without undue influence or pressure from other departments or administrative bodies. This budgetary process will be transparent and subject to regular review to ensure compliance with the IOA Standards of Practice, which mandate that the Ombuds Office and the Ombuds are independent from other organizational entities and have the authority to manage their budget and operations independently.
- **Voluntary Nature:** The Ombuds Office is a purely voluntary resource. Those using the Office agree to abide by its principles and Charter and not call the University Ombuds or anyone from the Office to testify or produce documents relating to confidential communications in any legal, administrative, or other proceeding.
- **Non-Notice to Institution:** Communication with the Ombuds does not constitute notice to the institution. The Ombuds Office will not be called to testify or produce documents in legal or administrative proceedings.

Authority and Limitations

The authority of the Ombuds derives from the establishment of the Ombuds Office by the University administration and the enactment of this Charter.

A. Ombuds Authority

1. **Have Discussions with Visitors and Others:** The Ombuds has the authority to discuss with visitors their concerns, available informal and formal pathways for resolution, options for next steps, relevant information, and resources. The

Ombuds also has the authority to invite parties to engage in voluntary facilitated conversations and mediations as appropriate.

2. **Initiate Informal Inquiries:** The Ombuds is entitled to inquire informally about any issue concerning a visitor or member of the communities served by the Ombuds. The Ombuds may initiate informal inquiries into matters that come to the attention of the Office without having received a specific complaint from a directly affected member of the University community.
3. **Access to Information:** The Ombuds may request access to University information related to visitors' concerns to the extent permitted by law and applicable University policies and will respect and preserve the confidentiality of that information.
4. **Decline/Withdraw from Participation in a Concern:** The Ombuds may withdraw from or decline to participate in a concern if they believe their involvement would be inappropriate for any reason.
5. **Access to Outside Legal Counsel:** On rare occasions, the Ombuds may require legal advice or representation to fulfill their required job functions. In such an event, the Ombuds will notify the University's Office of the General Counsel and seek the Counsel's permission to retain such representation.

B. Limitations on the Authority of the Ombuds

1. **Not Authorized to Receive Notice of Claims Against the University:** Communication to the Ombuds or the Ombuds Office does not constitute notice to the University. This includes allegations that may be perceived as violations of laws, regulations, or policies, such as sexual harassment or incidents subject to reporting under the Clery Act or Title IX.
2. **No Participation in Formal Processes and Investigations:** The Ombuds has no authority to conduct formal investigations of any kind. Unless required by law, the Ombuds will not willingly participate in formal investigative or adjudicative procedures, whether internal or external.
3. **Organizational Record Keeping:** The Ombuds Office's confidential records are not subject to the University's Record Retention and Destruction Policy. The Ombuds will not maintain records containing identifying information. If the Ombuds takes notes during a visitor consultation, they shall be stored in a secure location and manner, protected from inspection by others (including management), and destroyed in the regular course of business unless the Ombuds Office becomes subject to a legally binding requirement to maintain such records.
4. **Advocacy for Individual Parties or Entities:** The Ombuds has no authority to serve as an advocate, lawyer, representative, or counselor for any party in a dispute, nor will they represent University management or visitors to the Office. Rather, the

Ombuds will advocate for fair processes, respectful treatment, and equitable policies in the University.

5. **Business and Policy Decisions; Adjudication of Issues:** The Ombuds has no authority to make business or policy decisions on behalf of the University. The Ombuds also has no authority to adjudicate, impose remedies or sanctions, or to enforce or change University policies or rules.
6. **Counseling, Legal, or Psychological Services:** The Ombuds does not provide counseling services, legal services, or psychological services.

Interference with Use of the Ombuds Office and Retaliation

Because the Ombuds Office is intended to be a confidential resource, it is not appropriate for the University administration or others to inquire about an individual's use of the Office or any communication that may have taken place there. Retaliation against individuals for using the Ombuds Office is strictly prohibited.

Alignment with Howard University Strategic Plan

The Office of the Faculty Ombuds supports the Howard University Strategic Plan by:

- **Enhancing Faculty Experience:** Contributing to a supportive and fair work environment for faculty.
- **Promoting Excellence:** Upholding high standards of fairness and equity, which are essential for academic excellence.
- **Fostering Community:** Encouraging open communication and collaboration within the University community.

Review and Amendments

This Charter will be reviewed periodically to ensure it remains aligned with the evolving needs of the university and the best practices of the ombuds profession. Amendments to this charter require the approval of both the University President and the Faculty Ombuds with notice to the Chair of the Faculty Senate and the University Provost. Other signatories will be requested to acknowledge and sign the amended Charter.[See Signatories Page.]

Howard University Faculty Ombuds Charter

SIGNATORIES:

Signed by:

Dr. Ben Vinson, III

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President: Dr. Ben Vinson, III

Signed by:

Dr. Anthony K. Wutoh

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Provost and Chief Academic Officer: Dr. Anthony K. Wutoh

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Florence W. Prioleau, Esq.

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General Counsel: Florence W. Prioleau, Esq.

Signed by:

Rebecca Vazquez-Skillings

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Chief Financial Officer: Rebecca Vazquez-Skillings

Signed by:

Dr. Guericke C. Royal

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Faculty Senate Chair: Dr. Guericke Royal

Signed by:

Kevin Gerard Linder

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Faculty Ombuds: Kevin G. Linder

CERTIFICATION:

The above Representatives of Howard University agree that the attached **Howard University Faculty Ombuds Charter** may be acknowledged and executed by electronic signature, and that such signatures shall be deemed valid and binding with the same force and effect as handwritten signatures.

Signed by:

Christie Taylor

Attest:

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Date: 7/29/2025

Christie L. Taylor

Secretary, The Howard University