



**Charter for the Student Ombuds Office
University of South Florida**

I. INTRODUCTION

Title XLVIII (K-20 Education Code) within the Florida Statutes 1006.51 states:

- (1) There is created at each Florida College System institution and state university a student ombudsman office, which is accountable to the president.*
- (2) Each institution must have an established procedure by which a student may appeal to the office of the ombudsman a decision that is related to the student's access to courses and credit granted toward the degree. Detailed information concerning this procedure must be included in the institution's catalog.*
- (3) Each Florida College System institution and state university shall develop minimum standards for the role of ombudsman or student advocate. The standards shall address the issue of notification of students of opportunities for assistance or appeal.*

In an attempt to clarify the role, the Florida Board of Governors created Regulation 6.011 in 2009, which states:

- (1) Each university shall establish and maintain a student ombudsman function.*
- (2) The ombudsman shall not advocate for any individual, but shall advocate for fair and equitably administered processes and shall facilitate discussion to identify best options to resolve problems. A student's use of the ombudsman is voluntary and shall not be a required step in any grievance process.*
- (3) Each university's ombudsman and operation shall be guided by recognized professional standards of practice for the role of the ombudsman, including the principles of independence, neutrality, confidentiality, and informality, unless otherwise required by law.*
- (4) Additional roles or responsibilities within the university assigned to the ombudsman shall not compromise the ombudsman's neutrality in responding to an inquiry, concern, or conflict.*
- (5) Information on the ombudsman and its role shall be made readily available to all students, faculty, and staff and appear, at a minimum, in the student handbook as provided in BOG Regulation 6.010.*

Authority: Section 7(d), Art. IX, Fla. Const., History: New 12-10-09.

The Student Ombuds Office at the University of South Florida (USF) is a confidential, impartial, independent and informal resource for students who wish to convey concerns and/or resolve disputes related to the University. The Student Ombuds Office offers informal dispute resolution services, provides resources and referrals, and helps students consider options available to them. The Office operates independently as a supplement to existing administrative and formal dispute resolution processes and has no formal decision-making authority. The office is managed by a full-time student ombuds who is accessible to all students at USF. Campus-based ombuds liaisons may also be appointed to serve in an ombuds capacity on the St. Petersburg and Sarasota-Manatee campuses. The student ombuds and campus-based ombuds liaisons are not advocates for either side in a dispute. Instead, they are impartial advocates for fair and consistent treatment. The Student Ombuds Office promotes positive organizational change by facilitating improvements in University policies, procedures, services and systems to better serve students. The University recognizes that the Student Ombuds Office serves an important role as a mechanism for amicable, prompt and economical dispute resolution that may, in many instances, be preferable to formal grievance procedures and other proceedings. The Office reports for administrative and budgetary purpose to the Vice President for Student Success. This document defines the privileges and responsibilities of the Student Ombuds Office at USF.

II. STANDARDS OF PRACTICE AND CODE OF ETHICS

The Student Ombuds Office of USF operates under the [Standards of Practice](#) and [Code of Ethics](#) established by the International Ombudsman Association (IOA). These principles require that the Student Ombuds Office shall function independently of the organization, observe confidentiality and neutrality, and limit the scope of services to informal means of dispute resolution. The Student Ombuds and campus-based ombuds liaisons shall act with integrity, foster respect for all members of the University, and promote fairness in the content and administration of the University's practices, processes and policies.

A. Independence

The Student Ombuds Office is independent in structure, function and appearance to the highest degree possible within the University. The Student Ombuds and campus-based ombuds liaisons shall exercise sole discretion of whether and how to act regarding individual matters or systemic

concerns. To the extent permitted by law, the Student Ombuds Office shall have access to all University officials and records as needed to carry out its function. The Student Ombuds Office shall have a specific allocated budget, adequate space, and sufficient resources to meet operating needs and pursue professional development. The Student Ombuds shall have the authority to manage the budget and operations of the office. For administrative and budgetary matters, the Student Ombuds shall report to the Vice President for Student Success. Campus-based ombuds liaisons will have an informal reporting relationship to the Student Ombuds when they are acting in the role of ombuds.

B. Impartiality

The Student Ombuds Office shall not take sides in any conflict, dispute or issue. The Student Ombuds and campus-based ombuds liaisons shall impartially consider the interests and concerns of all visitors with the goal of facilitating communication and supporting a fair and equitable problem-solving process.

The Student Ombuds and campus-based ombuds liaisons shall avoid involvement in matters where there may be a conflict of interest. (A conflict of interest occurs when the private interests of ombuds staff, real or perceived, supersede or compete with his or her dedication to the neutral and independent role.)

C. Confidentiality

The Student Ombuds Office shall not disclose information provided in confidence unless the visitor requests it and the Student Ombuds or campus-based ombuds liaisons determine it to be an appropriate option, or the Student Ombuds or campus-based ombuds liaisons ask for and receive permission for disclosure, or the Student Ombuds or campus-based ombuds liaisons determine that there is an imminent risk of serious harm. The Student Ombuds and campus-based ombuds liaisons assert that there is a privilege of confidentiality with respect to the identity of visitors and their issues subject only to a court order. Staff of the Student Ombuds Office shall neither willingly participate as witnesses with respect to any confidential communications nor participate in any formal process inside or outside the University except by court order.

D. Informality

The Student Ombuds and campus-based ombuds liaisons are informal resources and do not investigate, arbitrate, adjudicate or in any other way participate in any internal or external formal process or action. Use of the services provided by the Student Ombuds Office are voluntary and are not a required step in any grievance process or University policy. The Student Ombuds Office is not authorized to receive formal complaints or notice of claims against the University. As set forth more fully below, the Student Ombuds and campus-based ombuds liaisons neither acts as agent for, nor accept notice on behalf of, the University, but may refer individuals to the appropriate place where formal notice can be made.

III. AUTHORITY OF THE STUDENT OMBUDS OFFICE

A. Informal Inquiries

Staff of the Student Ombuds Office at USF shall be entitled to inquire informally about any issue concerning the University, exercising sole discretion over whether or how to act regarding individual concerns or trends. The Student Ombuds and campus-based ombuds liaisons may initiate informal inquiries into matters that come to their attention without having received a specific complaint.

B. Access to Information

Members of the Student Ombuds Office staff may request access to information related to visitors' concerns from records and personnel at USF. The Student Ombuds Office staff shall respect the confidentiality of such information and break confidentiality only if evidence of imminent risk of serious harm exists. Requests by the Student Ombuds Office for information should be handled with reasonable promptness by University departments.

C. Ending Involvement in Matters

The Student Ombuds and campus-based ombuds liaisons may withdraw from or decline to look into a matter if they believe involvement would be inappropriate for any reason.

D. Discussions with Visitors and Others

The Student Ombuds and campus-based ombuds liaisons have the authority to discuss a range of options available to visitors, including both informal and formal processes. They may make any recommendations that they deem appropriate with regard to resolving problems or improving policies, rules, or procedures; however, the Student Ombuds and campus-based ombuds liaisons shall have no actual authority to impose remedies or sanctions or to enforce or change any policy, rule or procedure.

IV. LIMITS OF THE STUDENT OMBUDS OFFICE

- A. The Student Ombuds Office is not authorized to receive formal complaints or notice of claims against the University.*

Communication to the Student Ombuds Office at USF shall not constitute notice to the University about the existence of any problem, including but not limited to alleged violations of law, regulations, or policies such as sexual harassment, issues covered by whistleblower policy or incidents subject to reporting under Title IX except when required by law. If the Student Ombuds or campus-based ombuds liaisons determine that there is an imminent risk to health, safety or serious harm to a person or property, they may take action without further consent.

If a visitor to the Student Ombuds Office would like to put the University on notice regarding a specific situation, or desires that certain information be provided to the University, the Student Ombuds Office staff may refer the visitor to the appropriate USF office for administrative or formal grievance processes.

- B. The Student Ombuds Office staff will not participate in formal processes and investigations.*

The Student Ombuds Office shall not conduct formal investigations of any kind. Student Ombuds Office staff shall not willingly participate in the substance of any internal or external dispute process, either on behalf of a visitor to the office or on behalf of the University, unless required by court order.

C. The Student Ombuds Office does not keep formal records.

The Student Ombuds Office shall not create or maintain documents or records for the University about individual matters. The Office sets its own record-keeping practices and shall create and maintain informal notes until the Student Ombuds and/or campus-based ombuds liaisons conclude involvement in a matter, at which time such documents shall be destroyed. The Student Ombuds Office will maintain statistical data to assist in reporting trends and giving feedback, but only in a manner that reveals no information that could be used to identify individual visitors to the office. The Student Ombuds Office will act in compliance with applicable public records requirements.

D. The Student Ombuds and campus-based ombuds liaisons are not advocates.

The Student Ombuds and campus-based ombuds liaisons shall remain neutral and impartial while acting in that role. They shall not act as advocates for any party in a dispute; they shall neither represent the University nor visitors to the Student Ombuds Office.

E. The Student Ombuds Office does not adjudicate

The Student Ombuds Office does not have the authority to adjudicate, to impose remedies or sanctions, to compel others to impose remedies, or to enforce or change University policies or rules.

V. FUNCTIONAL RELATIONSHIPS

The Student Ombuds shall report to the Vice President for Student Success on a regular and ongoing basis. The Student Ombuds will provide oversight to campus-based ombuds liaisons when they are functioning in that role. Every student at USF shall have access to the Student Ombuds Office.

VI. APPLICATION OF THE CHARTER

Any act by students, employees or agents in violation of this Charter, including retaliation against those contacting the Student Ombuds Office, is beyond the scope of such person's authority and in conflict with USF's Regulations and Policies. As such, it is not an act by or on behalf of USF and therefore may result in disciplinary action up to and including termination.



UNIVERSITY of SOUTH FLORIDA

Charter for the Student Ombuds Office University of South Florida

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