

DRAFT - Ombudsman Proposal

Since its inception in 2011, the Women's Caucus has established its reputation as an advocate for women's issues on UD's campus. In this capacity, we have repeatedly received requests for assistance by staff and faculty for help determining where to go to confidentially discuss concerns about workplace conflicts, especially those related to bullying and harassment. The Office of Women's Affairs (OWA), prior to its dissolution, was such a resource. The Office of Equity and Inclusion (OEI), which subsumed the work of the OWA, plays an important role in advancing diversity and inclusion at UD. However, OEI is a compliance office and therefore cannot function as an independent, confidential resource. The type of counseling available through the state's Employee Assistance Program and by Dr. Cecily Sawyer Harmon at UD is oriented toward resolving mental health issues, not navigating the university's bureaucracy to find effective recourse without retaliation that is often at the heart of workplace conflict resolution. The Women's Caucus has attempted to assist where possible, but as volunteers from across the University we have neither the training and expertise nor the time nor the institutional independence to act as effective mediators. Other diversity caucuses see a similar need among their constituents.

To address this need and make strides toward an environment of truly inclusive excellence, **the Women's Caucus, the LGBT Caucus, the African Heritage Caucus, the Disability Caucus, the International Caucus, and the Latino/Hispanic Heritage Caucus propose the establishment of an Ombudsperson's Office at the University of Delaware (official sign on pending)**. Establishing an independent ombudsperson office will improve the institutional climate by facilitating open dialogue in a safe, neutral environment. Providing an appropriately trained ombudsperson who functions independently to serve as an impartial, confidential resource for all staff and faculty will be an investment in our intellectual capital. It will directly and indirectly enhance employee productivity and student success. It is also a cost-effective way to deescalate conflicts before they become problems.

The University of Delaware's Inclusive Excellence Diversity Blueprint states that the University will "put educational provisions and governing practices in place that allow us to vigorously uphold our principles of an academic community with a zero tolerance for bigotry, harassment, and hatred, empowered to challenge issues of social injustice and inequities in a spirit of unity, support, and respect." We believe that an Ombudsperson Office will go a very long way in helping the University achieve this goal.

The Caucuses support this initiative to promote individual well-being, foster collaborative professional relationships, and recruit and retain a diverse, high quality student body and workforce that will demonstrate we are a world-class institution. It is time we joined the 30 (of 34) public AAU institutions that offer independent ombuds services. Our research into their programs indicates that Stony Brook University has a particularly exemplary ombuds office. It has been in place since 1966 and offers *independent, impartial, confidential, and informal* consultations and resolution services for a range of issues, from workplace disputes and discrimination to interpersonal issues and ethical dilemmas. They can point their constituents to other University resources that are already in place and help them identify the right course of action. No such office currently exists at the University of Delaware.

We look forward to the opportunity to engage in more detailed discussions of this proposal.