THE OMBUDS CHRONICLE: Dialogues in Higher Education

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European Network of Ombuds in Higher Education

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Foreword

I am delighted to introduce the first issue of ENOHE's new publication, The Ombuds Chronicle: Dialogues in Higher Education. Over recent months, our Research and Publications Committee has worked to develop ENOHE's publications strategy, and the Chronicle - our new peer-reviewed publication - builds on earlier publications including our Occasional Papers series. We hope that, over time, the Chronicle will become a useful tool for our members and others, publishing topical research articles, case studies and commentaries, whilst also building a repository of relevant reference information.

We hope you enjoy this first issue, and encourage you to consider submitting an article for consideration in a future issue. Our website gives full information for authors.

Jean Grier

President

ENOHE

Navigating Hierarchy: A Comparative Examination of the Role of Academic Ombuds in Germany and the United States

Ursula Meiser, Ombudsperson for Teaching and Doctoral Degree Studies, University of Stuttgart

Ryan Smith, Assistant University Ombudsperson, Michigan State University[1]

The nature of the academic environment leads to a prevalence of hierarchical structures. Academic hierarchy has been documented within the higher education and organizational literature (Lang, 1984; Kotkin, 2019; Vanstone & Grierson, 2021). This academic hierarchy reflects stratification within the organizations, which may in turn reflect and further perpetuate social stratification externally (Acker, 1990). The role of the academic ombuds is to assist members of an academic community in navigating bureaucracy, grievance, and conflict. By their nature, these concerns are often rooted in issues of hierarchy. This article seeks to examine hierarchy within universities in both Germany and the United States, as well as the role that ombuds play as they work with students who seek to navigate hierarchy and bureaucracy within increasingly large and complex organizations. To this end, the authors will first present the current status of ombuds work in Germany and the United States, followed by a theoretical framework to explain the hierarchical nature of higher education institutions. A generalized case study will illustrate how a typical case would be handled by ombuds in the two countries. In the final part of the article, the authors present a toolbox for ombuds to navigate hierarchy, which is the result of a lengthy exploration of the topic.

Keywords: ombuds, ombudsman, hierarchy, higher education, toolbox for ombuds, comparative analysis, United States, Germany

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[1] The authors wish it to be known that, in their opinion, both authors should be regarded as joint first authors.

Introduction

The academic ombuds role, although relatively nascent, has both evolved and thrived since its creation in the mid 1960's. The resilience of the ombuds role is testament, in part, to its adaptability, as well as its ability to assist students or university employees in navigating structures, listening to concerns and complaints, pursuing investigations, and identifying concerning patterns. The academic ombuds is now a global concept, existing on every continent and within all types of organizations. The universities in which these ombuds reside are complex, bureaucratic institutions that students or employees may need assistance in negotiating. The inclusion of an ombuds may increase fairness, transparency, and provide counterbalance to allow an individual to achieve fair and just outcomes.

Given the diversity of the ombuds role, identifying a universal definition is complicated, and the practice and scope of an ombuds varies even within countries and by institution. Focusing on higher education, most national associations or networks publish descriptions, for example, the Association of Canadian College and University Ombudspersons (ACCUO) offers the following comprehensive one that a higher education ombudsman

> "provides accessible and independent mechanisms for addressing disputes or complaints respectfully and constructively. Through its provision of information, education, problem-solving interventions, investigations and recommendations, an ombuds office helps to address grievances fairly, assists in resolving conflict before it escalates and provides a feedback loop for the pro-active improvement of policies, procedures and practices on campus" (ACCUO, 2023).

In Germany, the national ombuds network, the *Netzwerk der Beschwerde- und Verbesserungsmanager*innen sowie der Ombudspersonen in Studium und Lehre an deutschen Hochschulen* (BeVeOm), promotes independence, confidentiality, neutrality and appreciation as standards of practice (BeVeOm 2020). The members of this network work in the field of teaching and studies and are therefore focused on the concerns and grievances of students in Bachelor's and Master's programmes. In the state of Baden-Württemberg, the State Higher Education Act mandates the appointment of ombudspersons for doctoral students. In addition, there is the German Ombuds Committee for Research Integrity (Ombudsgremium für wissenschaftliche Integrität, 2025) and ombudspersons for scientific misconduct at most universities. This results in a landscape of many bodies with different target groups and working methods.

Higher education ombuds in the United States are more closely aligned with the organizational ombuds model, defined by the International Ombuds Association (IOA) as "an individual who serves as a designated neutral within a specific organization and provides conflict resolution and problem-solving services to members of the organization" (International Ombuds Association, 2023). As ombuds are independently affiliated with organizations, consistency in practice is ensured through the International Ombuds Association's standards of practice and code of ethics. The standards of practice that guide organizational ombuds in the United States include independence, impartiality, informality, and confidentiality (International Ombuds Association, 2022).

Dealing with hierarchical structures is at the heart of the ombuds work.

While solving conflicts and addressing grievances, dealing with hierarchical structures is at the heart of the ombuds work. The ombuds is uniquely situated to create spaces where hierarchy is minimized so that members of the university can meet at eye level in order to find a solution to a conflict situation with the help of mutual understanding. Knowing the hierarchical structures of the own institution and building networks of mutual support with other parties of the university can be critical for the success of the ombuds work. This article will consider the role that ombuds play in higher education, and how they can navigate hierarchy in this role. This will be illustrated by an example of how ombuds can navigate hierarchy in their work, also showing differences in practice in Germany and the United States, and conclude with recommendations for best practice that will allow ombuds to navigate hierarchy in various contexts.

Hierarchy in the Higher Education System

The Cambridge Dictionary defines hierarchy as "a system in which people or things are put at various levels or ranks according to their importance" (Cambridge Dictionary, 2023). In the higher education system, importance is derived from position, which in turn is achieved through acquired knowledge in the form of degrees or research outcomes.

Diefenbach and Sillince (2011) provide a model through which we can explore hierarchy in organizations, discussing four separate manifestations of hierarchy in different types of organizations. The *bureaucratic or orthodox organization* is one with strict and rigid formal hierarchical structures, incorporating line management and more of a command-and-control structure. The *professional organization* provides less formal structure and more professional autonomy. Examples of this can be organizations composed of attorneys, physicians, or other professional occupations, often with affiliations with other professionals and professional organizations. The third is the *representative democratic organization*, which imbues ideals of democratic governance and shared decision making. These may resemble small organizations and partnerships that strive for a flat and co-equal organization model. Lastly, the *hybrid or postmodern organization*, utilizing forward thinking managerial and organizational models to create out of the box types of organizations and hierarchy. This may include self-management, decentralized work units, and other models that seek to circumvent hierarchy in organizations (Diefenbach & Sillince, 2011).

Within each of these models, exist both formal and informal elements of hierarchy. Formal hierarchy can be found in roles, organizational charts, and titles. Informal hierarchy lies beneath the surface, made up of relationships, institutional knowledge, process, and issues of both dominance and subordination with an organization.

Given their size and complexity, universities will ultimately incorporate multiple types of hierarchy within one institution. Many university functions, including teaching and research, would be classified as a "professional organization" (Diefenbach & Sillince, 2011, p. 1518) using the principles of seniority and of professional autonomy. There would be professional and support staff. Diefenbach and Sillince (2011, p. 1524) propose that "within the professional organization informal hierarchy is regarded as legitimate alongside formal hierarchy and facilitates it". Other units in a university, such as skilled trades and clerical roles may more closely resemble the bureaucratic or orthodox organization. Graduate students may be a bit of both, while undergraduate students (although they do not fit as neatly within this model), are often subject to a more formal hierarchical relationship with the university.

In addition, education systems globally serve as microcosms of the society in which they exist and will replicate and perpetuate external hierarchical structures. Lang (1984) examined academic hierarchy, and the outcomes of undergraduate students factoring things such as social class, gender, and race; tracking outputs in terms of graduate school placement. Hierarchy exists in graduate and professional programs as well. In many professional programs, hierarchy in graduate programs may reflect the hierarchy seen in the professional field at large (Vanstone & Grierson, 2021; Kodkin, 2019).

Lastly, higher education institutions are "loosely coupled" systems (Weick, 1976). The complexity of universities includes the fact that there are many different, sometimes overlapping, sometimes completely independent functions happening simultaneously. This can make navigation more complex. Although there are varying degrees of effectiveness, university structures are designed to be (or sometimes not to be) navigated by students. Universities contain internal support mechanisms for students as they navigate academic and non-academic life. Additional structures include physical and mental health services, resources for minoritized students, academic advisors, resident directors, etc. The role of the ombuds, then, is to exist within and supplement this ecosystem. The ombuds is not a replacement for these existing support services for students.

Ombuds in the German and US Education Systems

A look at the German and the US ombuds system quickly reveals that in the US there is a long tradition of ombuds offices, whereas in Germany a small group of lone wolves has established itself in the last fifteen years. The German ombudspersons naturally benefit from the example set by their colleagues in countries with more tradition, since, for example, they can point to official procedures or standards of practices.

The history of student ombuds in Germany starts in 2004 at Goethe University Frankfurt after a student-led initiative in the senate (Behrens, 2017, p. 15). Similar positions like complaint managers, feedback and idea managers and complaints offices have been introduced at some higher education institutions. Within the last few years, one can observe an increase of these positions.

Some Universities also appointed ombuds or complaint managers for international students following the recommendation of the National Code of Conduct for German Universities Regarding International Students that was issued in 2009 by the German Rectors' Conference (German Rectors' Conference, 2009). On a doctoral level all universities of the state of Baden-Württemberg have appointed or elected between one and six ombuds for doctoral degree studies. The German higher education system in general has become more diverse within the few last decades with 422 higher education institutions including research universities, universities for applied sciences, specialized universities for music, arts, theology or pedagogy and private universities offer study programs to almost three million students (Statistisches Bundesamt, 2022).

Within a German university, one will find different status groups: students, doctoral students, administrative staff, teaching staff, which can be either persons that are still building their own career, or permanent teaching staff and different types of professors, including junior, full and adjunct professors. All these groups have different representation in the bodies and committees of the institution. This is important because the ombuds will interact with all of these groups and the interaction will be different. Out of a hierarchical viewpoint, the weaker groups of students and doctoral degree students will address issues to the ombuds first. With a well-established ombuds office all status groups may ask the ombuds for support and recommendations of the ombuds will be taken into account when it comes to university-wide processes. Precisely because the ombudsperson travels on all hierarchical levels, she also has the most intimate insights into what is happening and can use this knowledge to foster change.

The higher education system in the United States is also diverse and complex. Institutions of higher education can range dramatically in size and scope, including locally funded community colleges, generally awarding two year (associate) and professional degrees, to large research institutions. These research institutions will employ a mix of teaching and research faculty, along with a large population of graduate students and postdoctoral fellows. Faculty are often defined by rank and tenure, including lecturer, assistant, associate, and full professors. This academic rank contributes to the hierarchical system within a university, sometimes to a greater degree than formal job titles. There are also many non-academic staff in areas ranging from admissions, financial aid, advising, to food service, facilities, and campus police. Structurally, private universities exist in the same way, hierarchy looking similar between the two.

Ombuds emerged in the US in the late 1960's, with the first office established at Eastern Montana University in 1966. The number of offices quickly grew throughout the next decade (Smith, 2020, p. 2). Educational ombuds in the US consider themselves organizational ombuds, closely following the standards of practice of independence, impartiality, informality, and confidentiality as outlined by the International Ombuds Association (IOA). The nature of the organizational ombuds allows them to navigate this hierarchy relatively unencumbered. Early writers noted that an ombuds should be someone of high status within an organization, which would allow them some level of prestige and professional protection as they navigated these structures (Smith, 2020, p. 2). Where internationally, some educational ombuds have the power to conduct investigations and issue findings, the informality of the organizational ombuds makes the role unique. This means that the ombuds must rely on the soft powers of influence, persuasion, and diplomacy; along with an intricate knowledge of a university as well as the scale, scope, and nuance of the institution's policy landscape.

As in Germany, ombuds serving in different organizations may operate slightly differently, and they may serve different populations. Some ombuds serve only students, while some serve a specific student population (i.e.

only graduate or undergraduate students), others serve faculty, staff, or some combination thereof. Best practice generally suggests that an ombuds serves the entire population of an institution, but this varies greatly depending on the institution.

In the US graduate students often have fewer formal support mechanisms than undergraduate students, but they will benefit from a closer relationship with their academic department or college. At the Ph.D. level, students form an intimate relationship with their Ph.D. advisor. When this relationship erodes, or in the case of a hostile workplace or academic bullying, the ombuds can serve as a helpful resource, helping students to navigate resources within their own academic department or the broader university. The nature of hierarchy is different for graduate students. While departments, advisors, and graduate committees have formal mechanisms of control over the student, there are also elements of the professional organization at play. Graduate students will have external professional support and networks on which they can rely, as well as credentials and access to external support.

> *Ombuds then, can assist visitors in navigating both formal and informal hierarchical structures.*

Ombuds, then, can assist visitors[2] in navigating both formal and informal hierarchical structures. Undergraduate students, for example, may need assistance in simply asking who they should approach with what, or how issues and concerns can escalated within a department. Ombuds can be useful in equipping students with both the concrete skills, such as relevant policy and contact information, but also with soft skills, such as how to frame a question or issue that they are confronting.

Ombuds can also be useful in assisting visitors to navigate informal hierarchy. Informal hierarchy is often at play as Ph.D. students seek to understand and navigate workplace or advising issues. These also become important as faculty members, post-docs, and other full-time faculty and staff are navigating interpersonal or workplace issues. In this space, the ombuds can help a visitor to gain a greater understanding of the landscape, and to explore options especially in the absence of one correct pathway.

While the support possibilities of the ombudsperson just described are similar in Germany, there is no such clear distinction between undergraduate and graduate students when it comes to the study or support structures. Student services will not differ if a student is on a Bachelor's or Master's degree program. What is changing are the expectations by the teaching personnel on the students to work independently and scientifically correct. These expectations then increase significantly during the doctorate, which can also result in greater problems over time if students do not actively look for support when they need it. The power inequality between supervisor and doctoral student is especially high here, as the supervisor usually also is the head of the department and is therefore signing working contracts or taking other relevant decisions.

Doctoral researchers and other young scientists will have graduate academies they can turn to with their needs and the graduate academy will get in contact with the ombuds in case of conflict. Even as ombuds offices are sometimes designated for specific populations, these offices are generally willing to speak with any member of a university community to aid in resolving an issue or concern. Although these interactions may differ, and result in referrals to appropriate resources.

An Example of a Universal Nature

In the previous chapters, some theoretical scenarios in which ombuds might become active have already been mentioned. This section will provide a generalized case, through which we can explore ombuds engagement in both the German and American contexts. Through the exploration of multiple comparative contexts, we can then develop tools and strategies that are universally applicable. Mary Rowe (1991) defines ombuds as “facilitators” and “change agents”. This framing is important as we discuss engagement and potential responses for ombuds in this space.

[2] This is a term used widely by organizational ombuds in the United States when discussing those seeking out ombuds services.

Graduate Students Navigating Departmental or Advisor Concerns:

The nature of the Ph.D. presents innumerable challenges, many of which are universal in nature. Ph.D. work can be highly independent and isolating in many ways, but it also creates a unique dependency (on the part of the student) on their advisor, department, college or faculty, and the university at large, thus reinforcing hierarchical structures. In some institutions, many things can be fluid or change from year to year, including research, funding, work, expectations, and sometimes even supervision. Additionally, the nature of the Ph.D. is inherently temporary. Universities will often fund Ph.Ds. for a specified period, after which they are expected to graduate and move on, and this timeline presents additional complications.

Given this context, the interpersonal dynamics between student and advisor may be the most important element. Students and advisors who work to develop trust, create clear channels for communication, and find ways to work together can enjoy a fruitful and fulfilling relationship and experience. Given its hierarchical nature, however, a relationship that sours or a toxic environment can have a dramatic impact on everyone involved. Bullying behaviors (referred to as academic bullying) can also easily manifest (Averbuch et al, 2001; Mahmoudi & Keashly, 2021). These situations may also leave the student with few options, especially in the absence of support from other parts of the university.

The role of the ombuds in assisting graduate and doctoral students has been well documented (Herfs, 2022; Herfs et. al., 2019). The following example has been designed to highlight much of the day-to-day work on an ombuds and illustrates how ombuds can assist visitors in navigating hierarchy within an individual unit on campus. Depending on the situation, the needs of the visitor, and an ombuds own standards of practice (which can vary from place to place), the response of the ombuds may vary. Responses can include simply speaking with the visitor (sense making, framing, clarifying options and relevant policies), offering to facilitate discussion among parties, or exploring appropriate and constructive ways to escalate individual or systemic concerns.

The Scenario

A visitor approached the ombuds office wanting to discuss ongoing concerns with their Ph.D. advisor[3]. The student was making progress, nearing graduation, and beginning work on their dissertation, however ongoing issues were becoming worse. As a part of the student's entry into the program, they were promised funding by the advisor and department. One stipulation of this funding was the agreement to conduct research, and to teach one course. The student, from their perspective, has always fulfilled the obligations as outlined in their offer letter from the university (generally ten hours per week for each of these commitments).

The student approaches the ombuds and shares that their advisor is requiring them to spend additional time supporting the advisor's own research, in addition to the work they were hired to do. Where the student was expecting the research assistant component to take up about ten hours per week, it now takes up between 20 and 30 hours per week. The advisor does not seem to recognize boundaries in this space and will contact the student at all hours of the night and on weekends, expecting immediate responses. This additional research is not directly related to their dissertation topic, and while they find it to be interesting, is not helping them as they approach graduation.

The student also discusses the work environment. The advisor does not clearly communicate their own needs or expectations with the student, often leading to confusion and frustration. The student shares that they ask questions, and try to seek clarity, but they are quickly belittled, and their concerns minimized. The advisor will often tell the student that they aren't cut out for this program and will sometimes insult their intelligence. The student is frustrated and does not feel that they are making adequate progress on their dissertation work and does not see a pathway where they can write and defend a dissertation successfully by the time they are expected to graduate. As they submit drafts to the advisor for review, the advisor takes a lot of time in returning drafts with comments. The process seems to be never ending, as the student continues to submit drafts, the advisor continues to return them expecting changes. Many of these comments are contradictory, reversing changes made in previous drafts of the paper.

[3] Also known as supervisor, chair, or primary investigator depending on the location and context.

After exploring the situation, the conversation between the visitor and the ombuds ultimately turns to what the visitor wants to achieve from the situation. The student has considered leaving the program, exploring a process for leaving with a master's degree. The student's ideal outcome, however, would be to identify a new advisor. The ombuds can be helpful in these situations by discussing relevant policies that impact the situation.

The viability of such a move may depend on specific factors, and even on institutional policies. But in any situation where a student is seeking a new advisor, the situation requires a thoughtful approach and the involvement of additional parties. The ombuds at this point will discuss this, the process, and strategies for having conversations with the advisor, other faculty members, and the academic unit to achieve the visitor's goals. There are many factors that are outside of the control of the student, the department, and the ombuds that must be considered. The ombuds as a neutral, informal, and independent resource can be helpful in assisting the student to explore these other factors. These include things such as can the student identify another faculty member with the expertise necessary to continue or pursue their research, will this set the student back further to complete their degree, how is this intertwined with the student's funding, are they funded through the department or as a part of a grant tied to their advisor? There are many other questions and things to explore that will be helpful when a student is weighing these decisions.

What is often required in such situations is a high degree of tact and diplomacy on the part of the student, supplemented by an understanding of the political dynamics of the academic department and university and departmental policies. While pursuing a change in advisor is no easy task, it is not necessarily impossible if this is what the student decides to do. There are some students that ultimately decide not to pursue a change. In these cases the ombuds can work with the student to develop strategies to better manage their advisor and develop other resources within the department and a recognition of hierarchies in the department can be helpful here. There are also times, unfortunately, where a student ends up leaving a program. These decisions are not easy ones on the part of the student, but they may involve factors other than the advisor relationship.

Discussion

While there are some differences between the German and US models of ombuds, there are strong similarities in the ways they engage with and navigate hierarchy. Herfs et. al. (2019) have come to a similar conclusion while looking at the systems of the US, Canada, Germany and the Netherlands. In fact, there are strong similarities between the German and US models of ombuds. Behrens (2015) indicated that both models operated as a campus or university ombuds. This structure inevitably leads to a diversity across practice (Behrens, 2015, p. 15). Additionally, both models incorporate a high degree of both neutrality and informality. Neither model formally intakes nor investigates complaints, a difference found in some other formal investigative ombuds models.

The example of a desperate doctoral student who has lost themself in the multitude of her tasks and who, from their point of view, is not getting any support from their supervisor, represents a classic counseling situation in the ombuds office, also out of an international perspective (Herfs et. al., 2019). As a rule, agreements on the tasks of the doctoral students are made at the beginning of the doctorate. It often turns out over time that the teaching and research tasks at the department take up so much time that less time than expected is available for one's own doctoral project. Conflicts then usually arise quietly or are not addressed at all. Many Ph.D. students spend years in this situation without communicating to their supervisor that they cannot fulfill all the tasks and feel left alone. Usually, all other doctoral students at the department are then in the same situation and the working atmosphere is filled with the unspoken expectation of working evenings and weekends.

One important reason for this is the hierarchical structure of the system. In both the US and Germany, Ph.D. advisors play a crucial role. If the advisor and student can maintain a positive working relationship, this relationship can produce outsized results. When this relationship does not work, it can be incredibly destructive. Due to the fact that the supervisor will be the person to award the grade of the Ph.D. project or be part of the examination board in Germany, or chair the student's dissertation committee in the US, students do not see a way to address their problems without fearing that this would negatively affect their academic career.

> *Creating the confidential space to talk about the pressure is considered very helpful by the visitors.*

This highlights the importance of hierarchy in these spaces. Awareness of the apparent and sometimes inapparent hierarchical structures at play, and the influence they have on students and faculty alike, can help visitors to successfully navigate these spaces and structures. As described in the example the ombuds can give a lot of support in this situation. Creating the confidential space to talk about the pressure, how it affects their lives and often their health, is considered very helpful by the visitors. With the experience from previous cases, the ombuds can also report on successful changes and give encouragement. They can point out ways and discuss the consequences adapted to the personal situation. Communication can be trained or prepared.

The German system also provides for the ombudsperson to accompany doctoral researchers to meetings, try to support communication actively and give recommendations for the procedure. Whether the ombuds remain in the background or not, their work enables the hierarchy to be flattened. By coaching doctoral students to enter into conversations more calmly or making constructive communication suggestions, they strengthen the students' self-confidence. When they enter discussions with the supervisors, they can draw attention to the hierarchically difficult situation and raise awareness of this issue among the professors.

Toolbox

From these discussions on the role of the academic ombuds in both German and US institutions and Diefenbach & Sillence's framing of formal and informal hierarchy, and the resulting lessons learned, we can extrapolate tools that will assist the ombuds in navigating hierarchical structures within their own institutions. The tools outlined below are designed to aid ombuds to navigate hierarchical institutions. Even in instances where other parties fail to acknowledge hierarchies, these tools may aid ombuds in this space. Additionally, while these tools may not represent every resource available, they are intended to present a general framework that can be expanded or adapted given a person's individual situation and resources.

Engage all Parties

In most cases, one party addresses a problem and the ombuds will meet with this person or group of students to listen to their description of the situation. Something that ombuds should be aware of is the possibility of becoming biased while listening to the first party and therefore one side of the story. Being empathic to their visitor, ombuds will try their best to understand them and relate to their needs.

Further on it will be important to address the same amount of attention to the other party sharing their point of view. Obviously, there will be cases like any form of misuse of power or discrimination that will make it extremely hard not to tend to one side. In a situation like this, especially when administration is not yet involved, the ombuds is the only person that will offer this neutral perspective, and a person accused of any form of misconduct will need someone to talk to and show them possible ways to stay part of the process and the institution itself without losing their reputation.

Being aware of the difference between sympathy and empathy will help the ombuds to stay in a professional role. Sympathy is literally translated and understood as the feeling of having something in common, making the ombuds and their visitor partners that suffer together like friends would do. Empathy means to understand the feeling, but the counseling person would not go to the emotional place herself while helping the other person dealing with their emotional state. While being empathetic ombuds can act impartially.

In the next step, it will be necessary to identify all parties needed to find a solution. Depending on the situation this will also be colleagues in administration or any relevant person in a degree program, for example a member of the examination board.

Be Present and Transparent

The presence of the ombuds at meetings will put them in the role of the moderator and it will shift the perception of the hierarchical situation. In a best-case scenario, the ombuds already built up some trust with all

parties through listening in an open-minded way and providing information and the comfort that they will not have to go through the process on their own.

Experience shows that this is also true for the person higher up in the hierarchy because they feel heard and most of them are not trained for difficult conversations. This makes the role of the ombuds even more valuable because they are the one person in the room that can navigate through the situation without being judgmental. The goal of the ombuds is to improve the situation and if they can hold up that attitude, the parties will feel it.

In an appointment with two parties or more, the ombuds will have to distribute their listening and translating of what has been said evenly among all parties.

Transparency cannot be underestimated in any case because it will result in trust. The ombuds is a reliable partner to students, administration and teaching staff if their steps will be understood and visible. Especially for administration, it proved to be helpful to show that ombuds are not working outside of the rules and regulations and make deals behind their backs.

Impartiality

It is crucial to the process that the ombuds stays impartial which one will achieve by giving equal attention to all visitors. For the process, this means that the ombuds will listen to all parties involved and engage those necessary. All parties may mean to include other offices, for example the student administration or the manager of a study program if their decision is relevant to solving the problem. Confidentiality requires that only necessary information is disclosed and consent of the visitors is always obtained.

The power of the ombuds is unique within any organization or system. Ombuds are not decision makers, but agents who can provide assistance, guidance, and advice to students as well as faculty and administration of a university. While ombuds reside outside of a traditional hierarchy, they are empowered by groups and individuals at all levels of a university, including the highest level, to provide these services. When an ombuds escalates or highlights an issue or concern, then, this is an exercise in the nuanced power that they hold.

Because of this complex and nuanced power, ombuds must work diligently to maintain the trust of all constituencies. This means remaining accessible and impartial in their work with students, faculty, and administration within a university. It also means building and maintaining appropriate relationships at all levels. As university administration changes, ombuds must also work to continually develop and maintain these relationships, as well as to communicate their own value.

Integrity

Staying impartial at all times will be the biggest task and challenge to the ombuds but it will result in integrity. As long as the integrity of the ombuds is unquestioned, their institution will listen to their suggestions and their reports will have weight.

Internal and External Networks

Many ombuds offices consist only of one person and that person is bound by confidentiality. In daily work, this can mean that the ombuds can feel like a lone wolf and it is important to create networks that make it possible to exchange experiences and get feedback from colleagues with similar tasks. These networks can be internal or external and it is advisable to have both.

Within the institution regular meetings with representatives of status groups and other offices like student administration, counseling, the student council or committees regarding study programs will be helpful to keep in touch and share information. To get an overview of all possible partners one can draw a map and sort them by proximity and frequency of exchange.

Furthermore, most countries have national networks for ombudspersons that one can join. Some international networks are also quite active and offer conferences and peer exchange. Meeting colleagues from other universities or countries will help with professionalization and self-care topics.

Develop “Institutional Fluency”

Sometimes navigating hierarchy can be as simple as knowing where to go with a question. To successfully navigate hierarchy, and to assist those with whom we work to do so, an ombuds must be able to understand

how a university, an organization, or other bureaucratic structure operates on the macro and micro levels. This means that an ombuds often requires a network of trusted connections, and a knowledge of who does what and how. This fluency will include elements such as the policy landscape, political dynamics, formal and informal sources of power within an institution, as well as cultural and historical aspects that influence how an organization operates. Ombuds often find that they understand much of the nuance – seen and unseen forces at work of a given issue or within the university as a whole – better than many administrators. This is because the job of the ombuds is, in part, to observe what is going on. As ombuds do not have administrative oversight, they are not expected to engage as a political actor in the same way that university administrators do, and thus this allows them the freedom to work as both an insider and an outsider.

Remain Curious

While it may not be apparent at certain times, our organizations and institutions are always changing and evolving. To navigate resulting changes in hierarchy, both formal and informal, an ombuds must continually ask questions, and engage with colleagues. Minor changes in personnel structures, or even a minor change in a person's job description or scope of responsibilities can significantly change the way hierarchy, especially formal hierarchy, functions. Many changes that occur are seen as internal, and may not be widely communicated when an area does not see the impact beyond its purview. But this is where an ombuds who asks questions and builds relationships will be able to more quickly and agilely assist visitors or help to identify additional considerations. Conversely, an ombuds who gets stuck in the way things have been done in the past, or is not keeping up with changes within an institution will be at a disadvantage when change is the cause of issues or concerns that we see. Ombuds must remain curious, up to date and involved in changes and conversations as they are happening. Additionally, this must be supplemented by continuous learning, which can be done through external engagement and professional development.

Conclusion

The present article pursued several objectives: first, it demonstrates that an understanding of hierarchies in higher education is an essential component to promote change. It was shown that both formal and informal hierarchies exist at universities and influence their development and their daily routines. Secondly, the authors wanted to shed light on the special role of ombuds in the higher education system and give some examples of their work and impact. By comparing two systems, namely Germany and the USA, a general description of the different ombuds systems and their history was provided.

Returning to the Diefenbach and Sillience's (2011) model of hierarchy in organizations, one can see the strong influences of both formal and informal hierarchy within a university environment. While universities as a whole do not fit neatly within one of the hierarchical models outlined by the authors, a university actually fits within multiple models, reflecting the complexity of the university as an organization, and stressing the importance of the ombuds role.

Even though academic discussion often points to differences between the two systems and draws conclusions about their functional efficiency, the view offered here shows that there are definitely commonalities. Both systems are rooted in complex hierarchical systems that both students and staff must navigate. It became particularly clear that ombuds can play a central role in this navigation. In both systems, ombuds have similar tasks and rights, and in both countries they act in similar scenarios. Thus, the discussion of the example also showed that similarities are greater than differences, which is why the toolbox developed at the end offers tips that can be understood as valid across the board.

When ombuds are able to navigate hierarchy successfully, they can offer their institution valuable support: they will empower students to communicate better and make more informed decisions, they help faculty and teaching staff to become mentors instead of supervisors. With every case they accompany, ombuds contribute to a deeper understanding at the different hierarchical levels. These skills apply, however, to other types of ombuds in and outside of higher education. An understanding and ability to translate and navigate hierarchy for those with whom ombuds work is a vital skill.

An ombuds can wear many hats, including process navigator, conflict resolver, change agent, complaint handler, and others depending on their context. An educational ombudsperson is part of their organization and yet at the same time is also outside the organization - their view and insight can go a long way to help an institution that wants to change. Hierarchy is inevitable, and will always be a part of an organization and culture. The understanding of this hierarchy, however, and the tools to help visitors to navigate it can be invaluable.

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