

---

# **The Ombuds Office 2022-2023 Annual Report**

## **Iowa State University**

July 1, 2022 – June 30, 2023



PREPARED BY  
Laura C. Smythe  
University Ombuds  
November 1, 2023

## MESSAGE FROM THE OMBUDS

This 2022-2023 Ombuds Office Annual Report represents the second report in my tenure as the University Ombuds for Iowa State University and the first report that reflects 12 months of my work. The 2021-2022 Ombuds Office Annual Report reflected work provided by both MWI (external Ombuds) and Laura Smythe (internal Ombuds). It is my distinct pleasure and my honor to serve the graduate and professional students, merit staff, professional and scientific staff, faculty, and administrators as a resource for constructive and respectful communication and collaboration. I appreciate this University's commitment to providing an excellent education within a safe and welcoming environment to all of our students and a safe, inclusive and invigorating workplace for all of our employees.

I appreciate President Wendy Wintersteen, Senior Vice President and Provost Jonathon Wickert and Associate Provost for Faculty Dawn Bratsch-Prince, the Faculty Senate, the Professional and Scientific Council and the Graduate and Professional Student Senate for their support of the Ombuds Office and for recognizing that this office is integral to accomplishing the University's Strategic Plan particularly as it pertains to the goal "to be the university that cultivates a diverse, equitable and inclusive environment where students, faculty and staff flourish." I hear every day from visitors how much they appreciate the opportunity to visit with somebody outside of their chain of command, somebody who can help them informally solve problems and somebody who listens without judgment, and with solely an intent to understand and support. I hear every day from visitors who appreciate the opportunity to mindfully reflect upon their situation in a safe environment. I hear every day from visitors who express gratitude for feeling heard, feeling seen and feeling supported.

The scaffolding of communication and conflict management skill sets I am able to offer and the support I am able to give is due in large part to the unique nature of the ethical tenets by which this office operates: confidentiality, impartiality, informality and independence. Campus-wide support of this office reflects the deep commitment to valuing each and every person who makes up the Iowa State University community. I deeply appreciate the opportunity to be of service to those who are feeling vulnerable and to those who are seeking to improve how they show up every day. I am inspired, every day, by the courage, tenacity, wisdom and care I see exhibited by our campus community members as they do their best, every day, to be their best.

Laura C. Smythe, M.A., M.A., J.D.

Iowa State University Ombuds, November 1, 2023

# The Ombuds Office 2022 – 2023 Annual Report

## Iowa State University

---

### History of the Iowa State University Ombuds Office

The Ombuds Office at Iowa State University has now been in place for 15 years. Laura C. Smythe joined the University in April 2022 as the second, full-time and in-house University Ombuds.

### Mission, Purpose and Function

The mission of the Iowa State University Ombuds Office is to foster and support an inclusive, positive and productive learning, working and living environment for faculty, staff, graduate/professional students, and administrators. The office fulfills this mission by promoting mutual respect, scaffolding mindful communication, assisting with the development of inclusive cultures, enabling fair processes and helping to manage and resolve problems that emerge within the university.

The primary purpose of the Ombuds Office is to assist members of the university community with resolving their own problems or conflicts informally, and at the lowest level possible, by providing a safe place where individuals can speak confidentially and candidly about their issues of concern. The Ombuds services are voluntary, and people contacting the Ombuds are referred to as “visitors”. Visitors receive assistance with clarifying their concerns, understanding applicable policies and procedures, and identifying resources and response options to address their concerns. Like many U.S. academic Ombuds offices, the Iowa State University Ombuds Office embraces a solutions-focused approach to problem solving. *Although the Ombuds may help the visitor to identify possible response options, the visitor always remains empowered to, and responsible for, selecting her or his or their own course of action or non-action.* The office also serves as a catalyst for positive change by helping to identify issues of concern, and by providing timely upward feedback when appropriate.

The Ombuds Office adheres to and operates by the ***Standards of Practice and the Code of Ethics*** established by the International Ombudsman Association (IOA) for Organizational Ombuds. The four key tenets are:

- **Confidentiality\***
- **Impartiality/Neutrality**
- **Informality**
- **Independence**

(Definitions Appendix A)

*\*Certain limitations apply, e.g., concern for imminent harm to self or others and abuse of populations who cannot take care of themselves.*

The Ombuds Office mission and purpose are accomplished by the following:

- Listening to concerns compassionately and non-judgmentally
- Analyzing problems and exploring possible response options
- Providing information about policies and services
- Providing leadership, management and supervisory consultation/coaching
- Referring to campus and community resources
- Coordinating with other university offices
- Working with groups of all sizes to develop cultures and climates of respect and collaboration
- Providing individual and group/unit conflict coaching
- Facilitating dialogue between individuals and groups
- Mediating disputes
- Providing training in human relations, communication and conflict management
- Noting trends and impacts
- Identifying means to improve problematic systemic trends

The benefit to Iowa State University is the potential for greater workplace satisfaction, improved morale, greater retention of students and employees, improved efficiency and fewer unnecessary formal processes, including legal action.

The Ombuds Office does not maintain identifiable records about individual or group issues. The office keeps only non-identifying statistical information and keeps it only long enough to generate each year's annual report.

An Ombuds is not an official agent of the university and will not serve as a witness nor offer testimony in any formal proceeding, unless required by law. Individuals using the services of the Ombuds Office retain their rights to all formal procedures ordinarily available to them and are solely responsible for determining their course of action.

## Year in Review

Iowa State University was served by one internal Ombuds during the year 2022-2023. Laura Smythe served as the in-house and on-campus University Ombuds. This report is submitted by Smythe and is a bit more extensive than last year's report due to her tenure for a full 12 months. Smythe served 232 visitors and addressed 294 matters through conventional visits offered either in person, via Zoom or by phone. Matters are distinct concerns brought to the attention of the Ombuds Office. It is not uncommon for a visitor to have more than one matter. It is also common for visitors to meet with an Ombuds many times throughout the reporting year. The number of matters noted also does not reflect the number of interactions handled by the Ombuds with visitors. In fact, the average number of interactions with a visitor per matter during this past year was 3.4 and the number of interactions per matter ranged from 1 – 23. In addition, the foregoing number of visitors and matters do not include the fact that Smythe also offered 45 trainings which represents more than 900 individuals served and worked on a regular basis with 15 different units on climate and culture representing dozens of discrete matters and 237 additional individuals served. This climate/culture work is not included in the above numbers of visitors and matters because the work is distinct from a typical office visit in that it is consistent and ongoing, regularly includes multiple people and the matters addressed are not discrete from one visit to the next.

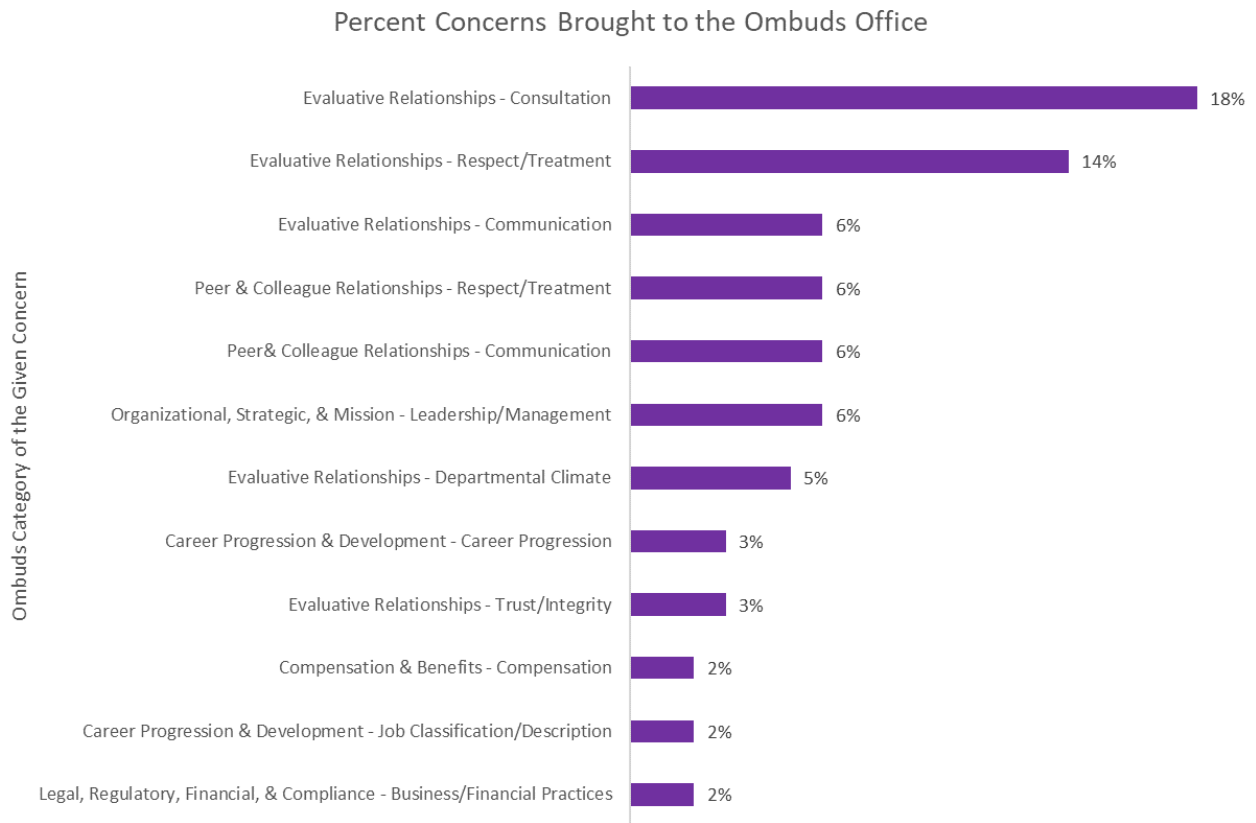
**“Each human is about 99.8% similar to any other human, 98% similar to a chimpanzee, and 50% similar to a fruit fly,” (Linden, 2020, p.28).**

## Nature of Problems

Every organization has concerns or problems that emerge within the normal course of conducting business. Iowa State University, similar to other organizations, provides multiple resources in addition to the Ombuds Office to help members of the community address their issues constructively. It is the confidential, impartial, informal and independent features of the Ombuds Office that most often prompt visitors to seek Ombuds services, especially as an initial resource. While contact with the Ombuds Office is confidential, the presenting *issues* are tracked. In noting the *nature* of concerns the Ombuds Office can inform the University of areas requiring attention. Please see Figure 1 below for a distribution of subjects brought to our attention this year.

**“Don’t squander joy. We can’t prepare for tragedy and loss. When we turn every opportunity to feel joy into a test drive for despair, we actually diminish our resilience... Every time we allow ourselves to lean into joy and give in to those moments, we build resilience and we cultivate hope. The joy becomes part of who we are, and when bad things happen – and they do happen – we are stronger,” – (Brown, 2012, p.126).**

**Figure 1: Subjects brought to the Ombuds Office, 2022-2023**



**Note:** Concerns brought to the attention of the Ombuds Office are delineated by IOA (International Ombuds Association) categories. This Figure represents all 12 months and reflects only those categories that respectively represent more than 2% of all matters brought to the attention of the Ombuds in 2022-2023 and do not represent the entire 294 matters addressed.

## Nature of Visitors and Contacts

**Table 1: Nature of Visitors and Contacts, 2022-2023**

Female	Male	Self-Referred	Referred Other
7%	1%	99%	1%

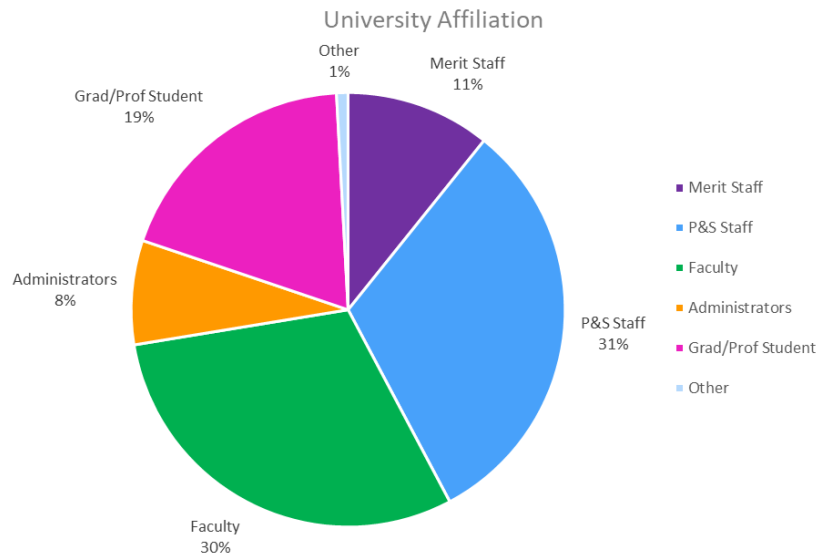
**Note:** The gender identity numbers in Table 1 do not equal one hundred percent. In addition, these numbers do not reflect all 232 visitors who met with the Ombuds. Because visual assessment is not a valid means of assessing gender identification, the numbers above for both gender identification and referral source rely on survey responses and many surveys are never returned and other surveys are filled out incompletely.

## University Affiliation

The Ombuds Office provides services to all faculty, all staff, graduate and professional students, and administrators of the university with the affiliation designation tied to the visitor/visitors initiating an individual matter. The affiliation of all individuals within a matter is not documented.

Figure 3 shows the distribution of cases based on the initiators' university affiliation. The "Other" category includes graduate and professional students who recently graduated and some affiliated employees.

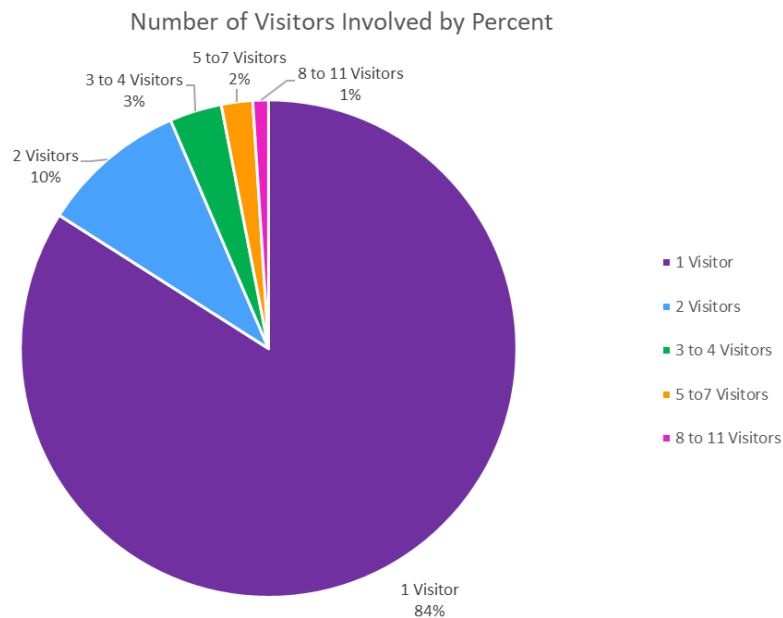
**Figure 3: University Affiliation, 2022-2023**



## Individuals Served and Types of Appointments

Figure 4 below shows that single individual matters were the most common this year. Please note that this data reflects only those who were visitors to the Ombuds office. It may be that a visitor had a concern about one or more other individuals. If those individuals were not contacted by the Ombuds then they are not counted as an individual served by the Ombuds. Please also note that some matters, regardless of the number of visitors involved, may require only a single contact with the Ombuds whereas other matters may require several dozen contacts over a period of weeks and/or months.

**Figure 4: Number of Individuals Involved Per Matter, 2022-2023**



**Note:** Quite a few visitors in 2022-2023 brought multiple matters to the Ombuds Office. This reflects, I believe, increasing confidence in the Ombuds Office after an initial meeting because visitors would return with multiple matters and/or a willingness to divulge additional tangential matters. There are, therefore, many visitors who are represented in multiple matters.

In 2022-2023 Ombuds services were offered via email exchanges, phone calls, online meetings and in-person meetings. Although conversations about a matter via email are actively discouraged due to concerns about confidentiality, they do occur on occasion. Most matters included a variety of contacts.



## **Outreach and Other Services**

The Ombuds Office actively contributes to the University's Statement of Aspiration: "to be the university that cultivates a diverse, equitable, and inclusive environment where students, faculty, and staff flourish" by addressing concerns for students, faculty and staff that would otherwise pose barriers to the relationships the students and faculty have with one another and with their peers. This support helps to create an environment that feels, and is, safer and is also therefore more conducive to learning and working. The Ombuds also works with individuals and entire units and departments to develop and promote respectful communication and conduct which enhances collaboration and the sense of feeling valued both of which result in improved efficiency and increased retention of students and employees.

Outreach activities include: introduction of the Ombuds and the Ombuds office to a wide variety of individuals, units and departments, coaching leaders at all levels, facilitating difficult conversations and training/teaching about (to name only a few common trainings): respectful communication, ethical leadership, difficult conversations, mediation skills, conflict management, and change management, and through individual seminars and group facilitations for academic departments and support units.

### **Outreach**

In 2022- 2023 Smythe reached out to every Chair of every academic department to introduce herself and to get to know the many colleges and academic departments across campus. This resulted in 39 dedicated meetings, and a dozen or so briefer exchanges via either email or in passing across campus. During this year, Smythe also worked with fifteen different units on climate and culture concerns, provided 45 trainings (several of which were conducted over multiple days and each of which varied in length from 1 hour to 9 hours of training) to various groups and constituencies and coached dozens of leaders at all levels on matters including skills such as: assertive communication, ethical communication, conflict management, supervising employees who are in conflict with one another, making the transition from peer/colleague to supervisor/chair, self-care and stress management and more. Smythe also spoke with 22 different groups (ranging from units and departments to leadership teams and the P&S Council) in order to introduce herself and the Ombuds Office.

### **Other Services**

#### *Professional Service*

The Ombuds is a member of the International Ombudsman Association (IOA) and the American Bar Association (ABA). She is also a participant in the Ombuds Committee in the Dispute Resolution Section of the ABA. Smythe was honored to be asked to present at the annual Way-Up Conference in Cedar Rapids in November on "Ethical, Mindful and Transparent Communication." She was also invited to give a talk to community leaders in NE Wisconsin in February on "Resilience: Is it Really About Bouncing Back?" In June, Smythe presented on the ISU campus, for the annual conference of the National Civil Engineering Department Heads Conference on "Conflict Management Tips for Heads of Departments", and, also in June, in

collaboration with the Provost's Office, she provided a 9-hour training for new faculty leaders on conflict management. In coordination with the P&S Council, Smythe also offered conflict management training to interested staff throughout the Spring semester.

Smythe also continued her service on a Sub-Committee of the Ombuds Committee within the ABA – Dispute Resolution Section to develop programming for Ombuds Day 2022 and was asked to confer with several colleagues throughout the country regarding ethical practice for an Organizational Ombuds in Higher Education.

### *Professional Development*

The Ombuds is committed to ongoing professional development and engages regularly in reflective practice with other experienced academic, healthcare, government and corporate Ombuds through video conferencing, email and phone consultation. Reading and research on relevant topics are also part of the Ombuds' regular practice. Smythe meets quarterly with Ombuds located within the state of Iowa and she meets monthly with Ombuds in higher education. In March, Smythe attended the ISU Conference on Race & Ethnicity. In April, Smythe attended the annual international conference of the International Ombuds Association where she participated in workshops and met several new colleagues who are also Ombuds in higher educational settings. Throughout the Spring Semester Smythe also participated in an asynchronous online training through the Boss Whispering Institute on how best to work constructively with abrasive leaders.

## **Efficacy of the Ombuds Office**

The definition of a successful outcome and Ombuds efficacy cannot be gauged by whether a problem is ultimately resolved according to a visitor's satisfaction or an Ombuds' preference. Some visitors consult with the Ombuds with the hope that the Ombuds will solve their problem for them. It can be very disappointing and frustrating for them to learn that it is not the role of the Ombuds to solve their problems for them. It is always the visitor's decision regarding how, or whether, they choose to resolve their issues. They retain full agency regarding their response. There are, however, multiple descriptors of success:

- Visitor better understands her concern and identifies solution options.
- Visitor feels better supported and less stressed about their situation.
- Visitor is better informed and prepared to self-advocate, act or not act and better understands the potential benefits and consequences of his choices.
- A potential problem is avoided.
- Further deterioration or escalation of a situation is avoided.
- A manifest problem is resolved.
- A policy or system problem (and a potential modification) is identified.
- Observations and recommendations are made to one or both of the governing bodies.
- Entire units are scaffolded to recognize and address barriers to successful and respectful communication and collaboration.

Helping visitors and all parties to be more respectful, effective, constructive and fair in seeking solutions to their concerns, and to reduce harmful tensions or hostility are considered successful outcomes from the perspective of the Ombuds Office.

There are, however, many problems where no remedies or resolution options are available. Some cases can leave visitors with few options, such as:

- Termination for cause or performance;
- Intractable disagreement over disciplinary actions and/or evaluation ratings;
- Differing expectations for a position and/or for the corresponding compensation;
- Many academic or employment decisions with clear processes and policies; and
- Many academic or employment decisions where no clear procedures or policies exist.

In these cases, being heard and being able to confirm that a relevant policy or action was appropriately or fairly applied, including talking about possible next steps, are crucial to moving forward for all parties. Where procedures or policies are vague, this also helps visitors gain insight that can assist their decision-making about next steps.

*The Ombuds assumes the validity of the experience and perspective of each visitor.* This is critical to the quality of being heard and understood that most visitors tell me is invaluable. Because I do not judge their experience or their perspective, visitors are empowered to be honest and to be vulnerable and because I listen without judgment, visitors often feel safe enough to explore their own conduct, respond to others' conduct and to take responsibility for that which they can control. This intervention alone has likely lessened the emergence of unnecessary escalation. The most common and highly appreciated benefit reported to the Ombuds is being heard without judgment or fear of retaliation and being assisted with sorting out issues and response options. Visitors report appreciating the safety they feel that results from the confidentiality, impartiality, informality and independence of the office. Visitors report feeling supported, respected, calmed and empowered with specific skills and approaches to address their situation.

### ***Assessment of Utility***

When assessing the impact of Ombuds services, results are difficult to measure since visitor perceptions of outcomes are often tied to factors outside of an Ombuds' role (an Ombuds cannot reverse decisions, change a grade, or adjudicate complaints, etc.) In addition, confidentiality precludes the use of many of the usual forms of evaluation.

The Ombuds Office uses two methods to assess the outcomes and impacts of services. The first is a survey form automatically sent to Visitors when the Ombuds closes a matter. It is not always easy to tell when a matter is over and so there may be some lag between a final visit and a survey being sent. Moreover, return rates for these surveys are only about 12%. The Ombuds also uses surveys in her trainings.

The second form of assessment is based on the Ombuds' self-analysis of completed cases ranking each case resolution between 'Satisfactory', 'Neutral', and 'Unsatisfactory'. These assessments are not a measure of visitor satisfaction. They are used as an element of reflective

practice. The scale attempts to help the Ombuds evaluate the service provided and outcome of each case as objectively as possible and Smythe’s self-analysis is captured in Appendix D.

Here is some feedback the Ombuds received via the surveys and also via email messages in response to meetings held with the Ombuds:

- “Thank you for your help and support. It helps to have someone that I can trust.”
- “Thank you. Knowing there was someone in the room who was impartial but also keeping a balance – that made all the difference.”
- “The amount of listening and reflecting back what I was saying was invaluable. I was given suggestions and strategies for dealing with a specific co-worker who was unhappy in her job and more specifically with me being in my job.”
- “Laura was considerate while we talked through my situation, even though ultimately, she couldn't resolve my situation (as it was beyond both of our control).”
- “No suggestions for improvement, she helped me immensely. I was in a secretly toxic work environment and wasn’t sure what to do since I just started at Iowa State and she validated my feelings and also offered suggestions that I actually took.”

Here are a few comments Smythe received as a result of surveys sent for her trainings:

- “I appreciated the self-awareness that the survey brought to how I deal with conflict. I also like the discussion of the different styles of how we approach conflict.”
- “The Ombuds is engaging, knowledgeable, and approachable.”
- “We needed more time to dig into the information.”
- “This has been one of the best trainings I have engaged in during my leadership training at ISU. Thank you!”
- “Laura is clearly a wealth of wisdom and just participating gave me so many ideas on how to communicate and think about relating differently.”

## **Ombuds Observations and Comments**

Most concerns or problems brought to the Ombuds Office are specific to a set of circumstances or particular individuals. However, when issues appear to be systemic within a college or division, or when they reflect broader trends across campus that might warrant further attention, the Ombuds may share these proactively and directly with the relevant administrator(s) and/or make recommendations in accordance with the professional standards of Organizational Ombuds.

The following observations reflect trends this Ombuds has noted during the 2022 – 2023 academic year based on her work with visitors from every corner of campus.

### Conflating Honesty with Disrespect

Within the dominant culture in the Midwest, there is a tendency to conflate honesty with disrespect. I see this reflected in communications and relationships throughout Iowa State University. There is a concern that honesty will be viewed as an inappropriate and unprofessional communication particularly when that honesty is shared up the chain of command. I think this is problematic for the healthy development of an organization of higher education that prides itself on cutting-edge research, innovation and creating an environment of learning and exploring.

In order to learn and innovate, our boundaries must be pushed and new paths forged. Habits and patterns ought to be questioned. It is inevitable that unforeseen consequences will occur and mistakes will be made. Our leadership must be able to rely on hearing timely, accurate, and honest reports about how policies and practices are executed and the consequences of executing those policies and practices. Leaders at all levels must embrace mistakes as invaluable learning opportunities that, when embraced publicly and without shame, are important tools for preventing repeated errors of the same ilk. Of course, tone of voice and word choice matter when communicating – regardless of what is being communicated.

I encourage all leaders and all employees and all students to speak up when something has happened that contravenes our values or that is harmful or hurtful. This need not be considered disrespectful. Being open to this information is how we learn and improve and develop relationships. I encourage leaders at all levels to embrace the reporting of mistakes and unforeseen consequences. We don't learn much in an environment of silent acquiescence. We learn the most at the edge of our comfort zone and we can role model our dedication to a life-long pursuit of learning through our response to both good news and bad.

### Relationships between Graduate/Professional Students and Their Major Professors and Principal Investigators

As I noted in my annual report for 2021 – 2022:

“Graduate and professional students are, from my perspective, a uniquely-vulnerable constituency at all universities; particularly R1 universities. They are often incredibly reliant upon only one or two major professors and/or principal investigators for their funding, their tutelage and their entry into their chosen profession. This means that when a conflict erupts between a graduate student or professional student and a scientist and/or major professor the students are often very reluctant to speak up for fear of losing their financial and professional support. This dynamic is exacerbated for our international graduate and professional students who are navigating the rigors of graduate school within a context of learning social norms, values and interweaving systems. Faculty and scientists who shepherd these students have tremendous power to shape lives and careers. Training for these mentors should be mandatory and regularly recurring. Training that includes some stories from our graduate and professional students might provide meaningful context within which to learn how they can be perceived.”

This remains salient information and context for all who identify with these constituencies and for all who support these constituencies. There is a very helpful handout crafted by the Graduate College that serves as a checklist for students and major professors, and/or assistantship supervisors who are embarking upon a new relationship. The “Student and Major Professor Checklist” is a useful resource for ensuring mindful conversations take place regarding expectations for behavior, timelines, research and scholarship, and roles. I find all too frequently that our graduate and professional students feel stymied in their progress by poor communication, unclear expectations and advisors who are difficult to reach. Faculty who serve as principal investigators and major professors are often frustrated that their expectations do not appear to be consistently understood or followed. The best and most efficient response to these situations is to have thoughtful conversations at the outset of each new relationship to ensure that there are shared expectations regarding preferred communication, timing of communication, timing of review of work, timelines for measuring progress, how authorship will be determined and how professionalism will be assessed.

I have not yet met with anybody who doesn’t feel busy – or – overscheduled. We humans are much more likely to communicate ineffectively when we are tired, when we feel rushed or when we feel overwhelmed. For the sake of our future professionals and for the sake of our current faculty and scientists – it is imperative that these relationships be founded on constructive communication and mutual trust. Without that bedrock – misunderstandings and miscommunications can all-too-easily escalate into damaged relationships and frustrated professional aspirations. The risks for our international students are even greater because the security of their stay in the United States is often tied to the success of their studies and the funding that comes with Graduate Assistantships. Let’s keep thinking about, and working on, how we can support all who are involved in these important relationships.

### Psychological Safety

Increasingly, this Ombuds is being asked to address the topic of psychological safety in the workplace with various groups, units and departments across campus. There is a widespread perception among our students and employees that their supervisors are conflict-averse, or worse, conflict-avoidant. Although the vast majority of humans would choose to avoid conflict if given the choice, the impact on individuals and an organization when leaders are conflict-avoidant is problematic. If leaders are not role-modeling how to respectfully, responsibly and timely address conflicts, then all who observe these leaders learn that they cannot rely upon their leadership to manage conflict and that there is no point in speaking up about conflict, or asking for help when actively engaged in conflict, because all who are paying attention to their leadership are learning that their culture is conflict avoidant. A psychologically-safe workplace embraces conflict as an opportunity to explore what isn’t working well, what information may be missing, misunderstood or outdated and to ensure that everybody learns from mistakes so that they aren’t repeated.

Psychological safety is *not* about ensuring comfort at work or about lowering standards. It is critical to hold people accountable to expectations for work produced and behavior. It is appropriate to be ambitious about goal-setting and to expect that employees will work toward goals together.

Psychological safety is more likely to exist when people feel safe to speak up, offer ideas, and ask questions without fear of being punished OR embarrassed. Fear inhibits learning. We pride ourselves at Iowa State University on our innovation. Neuroscientists tell us that when we experience fear – it inhibits learning and cooperation. How will we take risks, come up with new ideas and products and processes if we don't feel safe brainstorming, asking questions, exploring and experimenting with a new idea and making mistakes?

Psychological safety is more likely to exist when supervisees are confident that they can admit that they don't know how to do something and are also confident that their supervisor will not view that as a deficit but as a strength. Candor is appreciated. Social scientists tell us that supervisors are most likely to delegate new challenges and new tasks with greater responsibility to supervisees whom they know will ask for help if they hit a stumbling block or a barrier. They are not as likely to give new and challenging opportunities to supervisees who have demonstrated no willingness to admit when they need help and to ask for that help.

Psychological safety is more likely to exist when supervisors role-model responding to questions with the words "I don't know." Nobody has all of the answers and when leaders role-model this truth it empowers supervisees to speak up when they need help.

Psychological safety is more likely to exist when employees are encouraged to not just admit mistakes but to volunteer the mistakes they made in public forums and in front of their supervisors because everybody understands and assumes that we learn more from mistakes than we do from everything going according to plan.

For additional insight into both psychological safety and toxic work environments, I recommend the following article:

<https://www.forbes.com/sites/christinecarter/2023/09/05/bullying-introverts-and-stereotypes-11-persistent-signs-of-toxic-work-environments/?sh=730973922cb3>

Iowa State University is made up of so many thoughtful, dedicated and caring students and employees. We also all show up human every day. Because of that, it is important that we extend grace and compassion when confronted with behavior that we find confounding, confusing and/or disappointing. If all of us practice curiosity, rather than judgment, in the face of that which we don't understand – we are more likely to learn about somebody else's assumptions and to have a constructive conversation, we are more likely to find a resolution when we reach impasse and we are more likely to feel seen and heard by others when we do not behave according to their expectations.

The Ombuds Office exists to informally help individuals and bring observations and recommendations, as noted above, to the awareness of the governing bodies of the University. While the totality of issues brought to the Ombuds represents a limited number of people, they are nonetheless significant. It is generally understood that for every single visitor, there are likely many others who do not come forward and who have the same or similar issues. When responded to effectively by those who have both the responsibility and authority to manage this University, they are likely to steer the course of a culture to a more positive place. The Ombuds remains committed to helping all individuals collectively and collaboratively reach their individual and mutual goals in support of Iowa State University's mission and values.



## Appendix A

### Ethical Tenets of the Organizational Ombuds

In fulfilling its purpose, the Ombuds Office at Iowa State University adheres to and operates by the *Standards of Practice* and the *Code of Ethics* for Organizational Ombuds as established by the International Ombudsman Association (IOA). Organizational Ombuds differ from Classical/Executive Ombuds and other types of Ombuds in that they do not conduct formal investigations where confidentiality cannot be maintained. Nor do they advocate for anything other than fair process. Organizational Ombuds are not official agents of the University and therefore are not required to report certain events as mandated by Federal law.

**Confidentiality.** All contacts, conversations and information exchanged with the Ombuds remain confidential and are not disclosed by the Ombuds without the consent of all parties involved. Exceptions to confidentiality exist when disclosure is necessary to protect someone from imminent harm and when otherwise required by law.

**Neutrality and Impartiality.** An Ombuds is an impartial person on behalf of all members of the university community. As such, the Ombuds remains impartial and unaligned. An Ombuds does not take sides, serve as an agent, represent or advocate on behalf of any party or the university. Rather, it is the role of the Ombuds to consider the facts, rights, interests, and safety of all parties involved in a search for a fair resolution to a problem. An Ombuds promotes and advocates fairness and justice.

**Informality.** Consultations are conducted ‘off the record’ and *do not constitute notice to the university* in any way. Organizational Ombuds are not mandated reporters for most Federal and State laws. An Ombuds does not become involved in, or part of, formal institutional processes (such as mandatory reporting, formal complaints, investigations, appeals, etc.), unless otherwise specified in policy, and then only as a neutral process observer. No personal information is retained or used for subsequent formal proceedings. An Ombuds will not serve as a witness nor offer testimony in any formal proceeding, unless required by law. Individuals using the services of the Ombuds Office retain their rights to all formal procedures ordinarily available to them and are solely responsible for determining their course of action.

**Independence.** To ensure objectivity, the office operates independently of all university entities and reports to the highest possible level of the organization. *An Ombuds exercises sole discretion over whether or how to act regarding an individual’s concern, a trend or concerns of multiple individuals over time* (IOA Standards of Practice).

## **Appendix B**

### **Types of Services Offered by the Ombuds**

A ‘matter’ is any new or recurrent *issue* (after a previous case closure) that is brought to the Ombuds’ attention by one or more individuals seeking assistance. While the Ombuds Office does market its services, it does not proactively seek or initiate matters.

Matters vary from a single informational visit to highly complex interventions involving multiple parties and meetings and requiring considerable time. There may be more than one matter initiated by a single visitor if each issue requires independent follow-up.

The number of matters represents a conservative figure since numerous contacts occur informally and spontaneously in the course of conducting Ombuds business, such as during university meetings, training workshops, periodic involvement within units (when multiple concerns emerge) and during training and outreach visits.

**Mediations** are formal facilitated discussions where an agreement is reached regarding future conduct. Some mediations result in written agreements. Other mediations are non-binding, good faith agreements between parties.

**Facilitated Discussions** are similar to mediations. They are, however, more informal, and rarely have written agreements.

**Group Facilitations** can be focused on team building, conflict management, culture development or a myriad of other subjects and are a combination of training and working through the leadership’s and membership’s objectives for the group.

**Witnessing** is offered to visitors who wish to meet with others and who feel safer doing so with an impartial observer. The role of the Ombuds in this context is to ensure that all who participate feel heard and respected.

**Coaching** is offered to visitors who request it for themselves or, on occasion, when a supervisor of a new mid-level supervisor recommends the new supervisor work with the Ombuds to develop leadership skills, communication skills, conflict management skills, etc. Coaching is individually tailored to the visitor’s requested skill-scaffolding.

# Appendix C

## International Ombuds Association Reporting Categories

Figure 1, Page 6

### Category 1: Compensation and Benefits:

- 1.a. Compensation
- 1.b. Payroll
- 1.c. Benefits
- 1.d. Retirement, Pension
- 1.e. Other

### Category 2: Evaluative Relationships:

- 2.a. Priorities, Values, Beliefs
- 2.b. Respect, Treatment
- 2.c. Trust, Integrity
- 2.d. Reputation
- 2.e. Communication
- 2.f. Bullying, Mobbing
- 2.g. Diversity-Related
- 2.h. Retaliation
- 2.i. Physical Violence
- 2.j. Assignments, Schedules
- 2.k. Feedback
- 2.l. Consultation
- 2.m. Performance Appraisal/Grading
- 2.n. Departmental Climate
- 2.o. Supervisory Effectiveness
- 2.p. Insubordination
- 2.q. Discipline
- 2.r. Equity of Treatment
- 2.s. Other

### Category 3: Peer and Colleague Relationships:

- 3.a. Priorities, Values, Beliefs
- 3.b. Respect, Treatment
- 3.c. Trust, Integrity
- 3.d. Reputation
- 3.e. Communication
- 3.f. Bullying, Mobbing
- 3.g. Diversity-Related
- 3.h. Retaliation
- 3.i. Physical Violence
- 3.j. Other

### Category 4: Career Progression and Development:

- 4.a. Job Application, Selection and Recruitment Processes
- 4.b. Job Classification and Description
- 4.c. Involuntary Transfer, Change of Assignment
- 4.d. Tenure-Position Security, Ambiguity
- 4.e. Career Progression
- 4.f. Rotation and Duration of Assignment
- 4.g. Resignation
- 4.h. Termination/Non-Renewal
- 4.i. Re-employment of Former or Retired Staff
- 4.j. Position Elimination
- 4.k. Career Development /Coaching/Mentoring
- 4.l. Other

### Category 5: Legal, Regulatory, Financial and Compliance:

- 5.a. Criminal Activity
- 5.b. Business and Financial Practices
- 5.c. Harassment
- 5.d. Discrimination
- 5.e. Disability, Temporary or Permanent, Reasonable Accommodation
- 5.f. Accessibility
- 5.g. Intellectual Property Rights
- 5.h. Privacy and Security of Information
- 5.i. Property Damage
- 5.j. Other

### Category 6: Safety, Health and Physical Environment:

- 6.a. Safety
- 6.b. Physical Working/Living Conditions
- 6.c. Ergonomics
- 6.d. Cleanliness
- 6.e. Security
- 6.f. Telework, Flexplace
- 6.g. Safety Equipment
- 6.h. Environmental Policies
- 6.i. Work Related Stress and Work-Life Balance
- 6.j. Other

**Category 7: Services/Administrative Issues:**

- 7.a. Quality of Services
- 7.b. Responsiveness, Timeliness
- 7.c. Administrative Decisions and Interpretation, Application of Rules
- 7.d. Behavior of Service Providers
- 7.e. Other

**Category 8: Organizational, Strategic and Mission-Related:**

- 8.a. Strategic and Mission-Related, Strategic and Technical Management
- 8.b. Leadership and Management
- 8.c. Use of Positional Power, Authority
- 8.d. Communication
- 8.e. Restructuring and Relocation

- 8.f. Organizational Climate
- 8.g. Change Management
- 8.h. Priority Setting and/or Funding
- 8.i. Data, Methodology, Interpretation of Results
- 8.j. Interdepartmental, Interorganizational, Work, Territory
- 8.k. Other

**Category 9: Values, Ethics and Standards:**

- 9.a. Standards of Conduct
- 9.b. Values and Culture
- 9.c. Scientific Conduct, Integrity
- 9.d. Policies and Procedures NOT Covered in Above Categories
- 9.e. Other

## Appendix D

### Ombuds Smythe Self-Appraisal of Outcomes/Impacts of Matters 2022-2023 n = 294 (representing July 1, 2022 – June 30, 2023 and excluding trainings and Unit Work)

#### **Outcome Category and Specifier**

<b>Resolved satisfactorily with Ombuds Office assistance n=255</b>	<b>87%</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Mediation</i>: agreement/compromise reached through mediation; formal action avoided; visitor given another chance or situation otherwise satisfactorily resolved. 12%</li> <li>• <i>Miscellaneous Techniques</i>: conflict resolved short of mediation; may involve “shuttle diplomacy” or similar workshops intervention, with entire unit, or other techniques; formal action not taken. 21%</li> <li>• <i>Facilitated Discussions</i>: Ombuds served, by invitation or suggestion, as neutral observer; may involve role as moderator, but not mediator; visitor satisfied with outcome; formal action not taken. 20%</li> <li>• <i>Coaching</i>: Long-term coaching provided. 28%</li> <li>• <i>Information only or “light coaching”</i> was provided by Ombuds; and/or helps party to self-advocate. Visitor satisfied. 18%</li> <li>• <i>Policy/Procedure</i> or system modification/improvement. 1%</li> <li>• <i>Other</i> 0%</li> </ul> <p><i>Note that in this category more than one process may have been used for a single case and so the process noted is the primary one utilized.</i></p>	
<b>Neutral Outcome (Ombuds had no direct impact) n=26</b>	<b>9%</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Neutral Listener</i>: Ombuds role was primarily as a neutral listener; little or no ‘coaching’/or additional information was provided. Visitor already had or did not need information but needed ‘someone to listen’; may have received confirmation of ideas/plans, but nothing new added by Ombuds. 64%</li> <li>• <i>Cancels or ‘vanishes’</i>: Visitor initiated and then canceled or ‘vanished’ after setting appointment or before follow-up action was completed. 4%</li> <li>• <i>‘Unrepairable’</i>: situation upon arrival (e.g. temporary help, already terminated, tenure was denied for appropriate reason, or visitor resigned). 32%</li> <li>• <i>Other</i> 0%</li> </ul>	
<b>Results Unsatisfactory n=13</b>	<b>4%</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Visitor disgruntled</i>: with Ombuds efforts and discontinued visits or contacts. 15%</li> <li>• <i>Visitor disregarded</i>: advice/solution and suffered consequences. 55%</li> <li>• <i>Lack of cooperation</i>: unfair practice or situation not resolved nor corrected due to lack of cooperation. 30%</li> <li>• <i>Other</i> 0%</li> </ul>	

On occasion, problems would re-surface or new issues arose with previously-served visitors. Situations that deteriorate after concluding Ombuds involvement are not reflected in the Ombuds' assessment above.

***“Our emotional suffering is caused by our desire for things to be other than they are. The more we resist the fact of what is happening right now, the more we suffer... Pain is unavoidable; suffering is optional,”*** (Neff, 2011, p.94).

Brown, B. (2012). *Daring greatly: How the courage to be vulnerable transforms the way we love, love, parent and lead*. Avery.

Linden, D.. (2020). *Unique: The new science of human individuality..* Basic Books.

Neff, K. (2011). *Self-compassion: The proven power of being kind to yourself..* HarperCollins.