WCU Creates Ombuds Office

Welcome to the office of the ombuds!

The ombuds is a newly created pilot program at WCU. The ombuds office was established to assist faculty, staff, and administration in resolving disputes and preventing future conflicts.

The term “ombuds” is derived from the Swedish word for “representative.” Perhaps a better translation is “intermediary” or “facilitator.” In Sweden, a neutral ombuds addressed personal grievances raised by citizens against the government.

Although an ombuds plays different roles depending on the organization, the defining characteristics of an ombuds program remain the same. An ombuds is:

- Independent
- Impartial
- Informal
- Confidential

The ombuds does not act as a judge. Instead, the ombuds works with employees to explore options for resolving a dispute or misunderstanding. The ombuds may act on behalf of an employee by bringing anonymous issues to the attention of administration. The ombuds may act as an intermediary between an employee and supervisor and meet with them separately to address concerns. If desired, the ombuds may facilitate conversations between co-workers or employees and supervisors to help them resolve an issue and to prevent future misunderstandings.

Here at WCU, the university defines an “ombuds” as an “independent resource for problem resolution [who] works to ensure that members of the university community are treated equitably and fairly.” Issues appropriate for the ombuds office include:

- Interpersonal conflicts
- Departmental conflicts
- Complaints of unfair treatment or harassment
- Other workplace grievances or misunderstandings.

The ombuds is not a substitute for the formal grievance and hearing procedures already in place. Faculty and staff are encouraged to contact the ombuds for assistance before the situation escalates to the point where formal action is appropriate.

An ombuds program is built on confidentiality. Discussions with the ombuds are confidential with some exceptions:
1. If the employee waives confidentiality;
2. Where an imminent or significant risk of harm exists to the health and safety of the campus community; or
3. When otherwise required by law.

The creation of the office of the ombuds gives the WCU employee community the opportunity to transform the work environment and make significant cultural changes. In *The Organizational Ombudsman as Change Agent*, an article published in the *Negotiation Journal*, Marsha Wagner describes the role of the ombuds as: “to help resolve the particular concerns brought to the ombuds office, and –if the case involves unfortunate oversights, difficulties, or wrongdoing – to address the organizational conditions with recommendations for change to try to ensure that such a situation will not recur.” The WCU ombuds will report to the provost (without identifying complainants by name or department) trends within the university that need to be addressed, policies that need clarification, and workshops for supervisors on recurring themes.

Jayne Zanglein serves as the ombuds for the university. To schedule a private meeting, call her at 828-331-0866 (cell) or 828-227-7191 (office). Her office is in Forsyth 202.