

# Expansion of the Office of the University Ombudsperson

***Strategic Plan Theme:*** Staff and Faculty Success

***Funding Level:*** Below \$1 million

***Facility Needs:*** Adjustments to existing facilities will be needed

***Submitting Unit:*** Office of the University Ombudsperson

***Collaborating colleges/departments/units involved with this proposal.***

NA

***What is the proposal's big theme or idea?***

Expansion of the Office of the University Ombudsperson

***What is the proposal's goal?***

Expanding the scope of the Office of the University Ombudsperson to include addressing faculty and staff conflicts will increase help seeking and fill gaps in our current conflict management system.

***Define the significance, or impact of your big idea.***

The Office of the University Ombudsperson has a long-standing history of serving student concerns. In fact, it is the longest standing ombuds office at any college or university in the United States. During this time, it has become a resource for students who are in conflict with representatives of the institution advising them as to their rights, providing resources related to help-seeking for academic and non-academic issues, as well as coaching on conflict resolution pieces. As a confidential, neutral, independent and informal resource, it has consistently offered a space for student community members to explore their options without fear of retaliation or triggering the formal processes of the institution. Many of these issues have included issues for conflicts with instructors and academic advisors over university requirements and policies to harassment/discrimination in many forms.

Unfortunately, there lacks parity for faculty/staff on campus. While formal procedures are in place at MSU, employees may feel as though they do not have options (or they are not fully aware of what these options are) for reporting, exploring options, or simply discussing their situations and concerns. What happens as a result is that issues go unreported, employees move around or leave the institution, or they become frustrated when they do not feel as though their issues are being heard. Employees regularly approach the University Ombudsperson to discuss workplace concerns. While the Ombudsperson can speak with them, and offer perspective, employees are told that their issues are beyond the scope of the office and they are referred back to formal processes.

Research on employee focused dispute resolution has demonstrated the need for both formal and informal channels for dispute resolution. While formal channels are adequate and appropriate for many employee needs, the supplement of an Ombuds can greatly assist in helping employees to navigate these formal channels and to provide assistance to employees who do not wish to pursue formal channels or where a formal channel does not exist as in the case of peer-to-peer conflict or concerns that may fall outside the scope of a union contract.

***Who will be impacted?***

All university faculty and staff as it promotes to the culture of care, as well as addressing gaps in the current conflict management system.

***What does sustainability for your proposal look like?***

As the Office of the University Ombudsperson has been the longest standing ombuds office in the United States for over fifty years, our work in this space has already proven our sustainability in resolving student concerns. With the expansion, impact sustainability would appear in the form of faculty and staff seeking the office to assist in their concerns and increased help-seeking behavior.

In addition, it is common for ombuds offices in business and academia to justify themselves based on cost savings to the sponsoring institution. It is always difficult to assign cost value to events that didn't happen because of one's intervention. For example, it is not possible to know how many of the visitors considering "hiring an attorney" would have gone ahead with that plan if they do not come to the Office of the University Ombudsperson. It is also beyond the office's ability to predict what costs the university may incur in responding to such a lawsuit (or dealing with the reputational fallout of a media inquiry). While assigning actual dollar values to each of the options is difficult, it is the office's hope and belief that the expansion of the Office of the University Ombudsperson would save the university and its faculty and staff a great deal of time and money.