

UNIVERSITY OF
South Carolina

STAFF OMBUDS OFFICE ANNUAL REPORT 2025-26



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ABOUT THE OFFICE

Now completing its second academic year of operation, the Staff Ombuds Office was launched on Jan. 16, 2024 to provide an independent, informal, confidential and neutral resource for exempt and non-exempt employees of the University of South Carolina campus to deal with conflict.
As part of supporting a top-performing, fair and healthy workplace environment, services included:

- individual consultation
- informal mediation
- group facilitation
- training and resources

Ongoing marketing of the office included expansion of resources on the Staff Ombuds website; development of a downloadable marketing flyer; six presentations about the office; two resource tables; and eight training workshops.

ABOUT THE OMBUDS

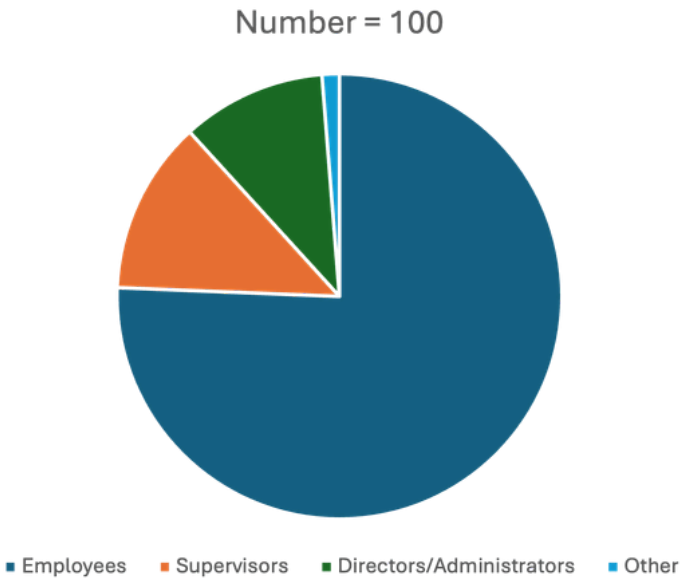
Before coming to USC, Robynn Pease served as an organizational ombuds at Oregon State University where she consulted with faculty, staff, graduate and undergraduate students.

Additionally, she served as Assistant Director of the OSU Family Resource Center, director of the OSU Academic Affairs Office of Work-Life and the Greater Oregon Higher Education Recruitment Consortium, where she assisted staff, faculty and students with dependent care needs across the lifespan.

Robynn holds a doctorate from the University of Kentucky in Sociology with expertise in gerontology and social inequalities. She is a trained mediator, an active member of the International Ombuds Association and a certified long-term care ombudsman in Oregon and Kentucky.

VISITOR DATA AND REACH

As a result of these ongoing efforts, the number of visitors to the office between July 1, 2025 to June 26, 2026, was robust at 100, representing over 20 colleges, divisions, and campuses across USC. Nearly three-quarter of the visitors (72%) were employees; 12% were supervisors or managers; and 10% were directors or administrators. The number of consultations for this year (100) remains about the same as last year's (162 visitors from January 2024 – June 2025).



Additionally, 25% of the visitors for 2025-26 were previous visitors with new concerns. Among all visitors, 26% consulted two or more times with the Staff Ombuds about a specific situation or issue. The Staff Ombuds also increased her research and outreach to other university partners or resources on behalf of 36% of visitors.

Service	Services provided	Number served
Individual consultations (includes returning individuals with new concerns)	100	100
Informal mediations	1	2
Group facilitations	1	13
Training, presentations and resource tables	16	300

RISKS AND RELATIONSHIPS

Visitor-expressed risks

These are the risks that visitors expressly stated. Of the 100 visitors, 50% identified at least one associated risk. Unresolved conflict creates risks and costs for the institution and/or the individual. Risks visitors expressed in consultations included:

- Risk of personal health and well-being (46)
- Risk of resignation (24)
- Risk of non-compliance (4)
- Risk of lawsuit (4)
- Risk of termination (1)

Relationships in conflict

There are a variety of relationships that staff must navigate during their daily work. During the 2025-26 academic year, the majority of visitors had conflict with those higher up in their organization.

Of the 72 visitors who were employees:

- 44% had concerns with their direct supervisors or managers.
- 33% had concerns with their directors or administrators.
- 8% had concerns with peers.
- 15% had a concern with university policy or process.

Among those visitors who were supervisors, managers, directors or administrators:

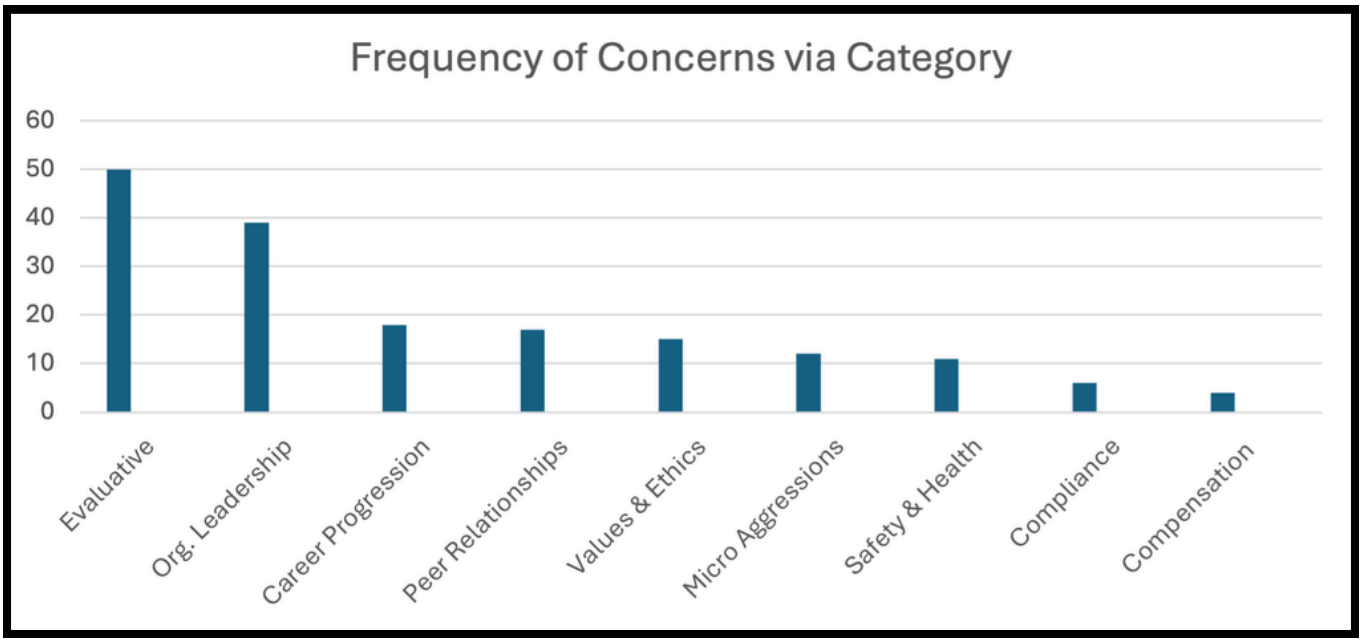
- 65% had concerns with employees
- 35% had concerns with another supervisor, manager, director or administrator

MAIN CONCERNS

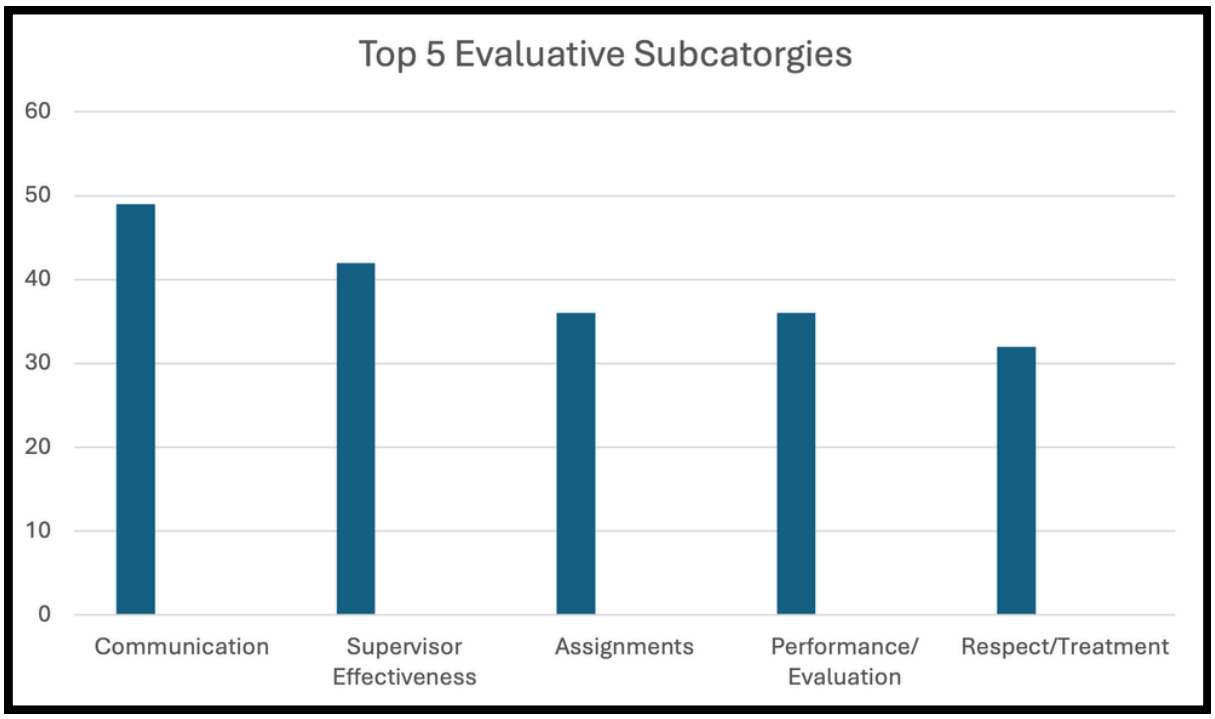
Following the International Ombuds Association (IOA) categories of data collection, the Staff Ombuds collected aggregate data for the following categories:

- Evaluative (supervisor-employee relationships).
- Organization and leadership (positional power of authority, communication, organizational climate, priority setting, change management).
- Career progression.
- Peer and relationships.
- Values, ethics and standards (standards of conduct, values of the organization).
- Micro-aggression (age, race/ethnicity, gender/sexual identity, ability, religion, other).
- Safety, health and well-being or physical environment (physical and psychological safety, work-life related stress).
- Compliance (legal, regulatory, financial compliance for the organization).
- Compensation and benefits.

Most visitors (71%) expressed concerns that related to more than one main category.



MAIN CONCERNS (CONT.)





KEY OBSERVATIONS

This year's tracking of visitors' concerns indicates that the relationship between employees and their supervisors, managers, directors and administrators continues to be challenging.

Aggregate data suggests that communication and effective supervision are central issues that overlap with perceived fair and accurate performance evaluations, distribution of assignments and respect. Formal university processes, such as training for new supervisors and up-to-date position descriptions can mitigate many of these issues. Additionally, supervisors providing consistent, clear expectations alongside regular, constructive feedback would significantly reduce the potential for conflict.

At the same time, close attention to how people communicate in the workplace, i.e. tone, word choice, timing, demonstration of care for others and their psychological and physical welfare, would greatly reduce conflict and enhance the overall quality of the workplace environment.

Interrelated to employee-supervisor relationships are organizational leadership and management. Uneven or uncommunicative leadership at the unit or department level can create unclear expectations for workplace performance for both supervisors and employees.

Lack of transparency and excessive use of positional power and authority can create a toxic organizational climate where employees feel that they are unable to be successful, particularly during times of organizational restructuring and changes in management.

TRAINING AND RESOURCES

The Staff Ombuds expanded her role on campus, serving as a member of the President's Commission Employee Insights and as a guest instructor about generations in the workplace for the Office of Access and Opportunity's Inclusive Excellence Institute. She also offered the following trainings, reaching 300 individuals across USC, approximately the same number of people as last year (500 individuals during January 2024 – June 2025).

Strategies for Successfully Navigating Conflict in a Multigenerational Workplace

Chronological age provides a unique mindset for interaction within the workplace. This training explores the generational influences that shape workplace values, practices and perspectives. With 4 -5 generations now actively engaged in full-time employment, the multigenerational workplace is here to stay.

Defining Dignity and its Essential Role in Resolving Conflict

Drawing primarily upon the research of Donna Hicks, this training reviewed the difference between respect and dignity; identified positive behaviors that strengthen communication, engagement, and collaboration; and reviewed common, everyday violations of dignity and their consequences impede productive, collaborative workplaces.

SATISFACTION, TRAININGS AND CONCLUSION

Visitor satisfaction

The Staff Ombuds Office received three responses to the online post-visit survey form. All three responses strongly agreed that the Staff Ombuds listened to their concerns and helped them identify productive ways to address them. They also strongly agreed that they would recommend the office to others. If they hadn't visited the Staff Office, one respondent stated that they would "file a grievance"; one responded they would "give up and remain silent"; another wrote, "raise hell."

Additional comments included:

- "Robynn was incredibly responsive and helpful!"
- "Very helpful and professional and discrete."
- "Before reaching out, I had given up and felt like no one would listen, I wanted to leave my position. The Staff Ombuds took the time to truly listen and understand my concerns. They offered a thoughtful and balanced perspective that helped me see things differently. Her follow-up showed a high level of care and professionalism. Even with what I imagine is a heavy workload, she made me feel like a priority. I felt heard, supported, and respected throughout the process."

Professional training and development

The Staff Ombuds' professional engagement included serving as an active member of the International Ombuds Association's Professional Development and Annual Conference Planning Committees. She was also a regular participant in the regional ombuds practitioners' group, OSLAC (Ombuds in Small Liberal Arts Colleges).

Conclusion

The Staff Ombuds has identified the following initiatives for 2026-2027:

- Explore International Ombuds Association Certification of the Staff Ombuds Office
- Establish AI Guidelines to Ensure Confidentiality
- Adopt a University Staff Ombuds Charter
- Increase targeted outreach and education about the Staff Ombuds office and its role as an informal resource for conflict resolution

The Staff Ombuds provides informal*, impartial, independent, and confidential** conflict management services to all staff at USC in accordance to IOA Standards of Practice and Code of Ethics.

*The Staff Ombuds Office does not serve as an office of notice. **Confidentiality cannot be promised if there is imminent risk of serious harm or if compelled by university policy or law.