

UAlbany Ombudsperson for Academic Renewal, Review, Tenure, and Promotion Cases

Background

At the University at Albany, when procedural difficulties occur during the academic renewal, review, tenure, and promotion processes, the office to which faculty members chiefly have recourse is that of the Office of the Provost and Vice President for Academic Affairs. This office, however, is also directly involved in renewal, review, tenure, and promotion processes and is responsible for evaluating faculty dossiers and making a formal recommendation to the President. Further, it directs the academic operations of the university, including oversight of Deans and academic Departments, which means that it has established, ongoing relationships with institutional actors at many stages. There exists, therefore, at least the appearance of and potential for institutional conflicts of interest, which can make it difficult for faculty members to approach the Provost's Office for counsel or to address problems that may arise during renewal, review, tenure, and promotion processes.

Proposal

It is in the interest of the University, individual faculty members, and the Albany Chapter of United University Professions that the academic renewal, review, tenure, and promotion processes be without apparent or potential conflicts of interest and be structured in a way that provides a fair and transparent evaluation of faculty dossiers. The Albany Chapter of UUP proposes, therefore, that UAlbany consider establishing a position of Ombudsperson for the academic renewal, review, tenure, and promotion processes.

Following the standards of The International Ombudsman Association (IOA), the proposed Ombudsperson would follow the principles of confidentiality, neutrality, informality, accessibility, and independence.

The Ombudsperson would:

- provide independent, informal, and non-partisan counsel to faculty on matters relating to University academic renewal, review, tenure, and promotion processes;
- serve as wise, approachable listener, counselor, mediator, or fact-finder, and may provide the faculty member with feedback concerning questions, concerns, or complaints;
- help mediate conflicts (including "shuttle diplomacy" within or between the various institutional levels of review);
- when necessary, suggest referrals to other resources available to faculty; and
- maintain confidentiality except in cases where there is risk of physical harm, or court order.

The Ombudsperson would not:

- be able to compel the University to action or to respond;
- constitute official notification to the University of problems or concerns;
- overrule decisions made by University officials;
- be a replacement for formal grievance procedures of the University or UUP;
- maintain permanent records of its interactions with faculty; or
- provide legal advice.

Albany UUP also proposes that the proposed Ombudsperson office would be:

- partisan neither to the candidate nor the University, but to the evaluative process as a whole;
- report directly to the University President;
- staffed by a Full Professor or Emeritus Faculty from a list agreed upon by the UAlbany Campus President, University Senate Chair, UUP Chapter President and/or their designees, similar to the model recently used in establishing a list of potential chairs for Article 33 appeals. This position should include compensation or release.

- appointed for a three-year term, followed by a review/evaluation process conducted by the UAAlbany Campus President, University Senate Chair, UUP Chapter President and/or their designees. This review would include a written report by the Ombudsperson identifying procedural problems or suggestions for improvement.

Models in SUNY System

There exist several models within the SUNY system for the establishment of the office of Ombudsperson.

- UAAlbany: Graduate Student Ombuds Office (see www.albany.edu/graduate/graduate-ombuds.php). In 2006 and 2009, the University Senate considered proposals for the creation of an undergraduate Ombuds Office.
- Binghamton University: Ombudsman serves all members of the University community. This is a full time position with support staff (see www.binghamton.edu/ombudsman).
- Stony Brook University: University Ombudsman serves all members of the University community. Stony Brook employs a University Ombudsman as well as Assistant Ombudsman (see <http://www.stonybrook.edu/ombuds>).