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An Exploratory Study of Ombuds as Agents of Change: From Observation to Action

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An Exploratory Study of Ombuds as Agents of Change: From Observation to Action

by

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Dedication

To Anthony, Marcus, and Lucia. It doesn't matter how many times you fall down, what matters is how many times you get back up. Thank you for helping me get up, time and time again.

Acknowledgments

This paper is a culmination of years of hard work while studying Conflict Analysis and Resolution at Nova Southeastern University. I would like to start by expressing my gratitude to all the teachers and staff that I have learned from and been challenged by throughout my studies.

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Abstract

This research focuses on identifying successful approaches used by university ombuds offices to enact change regarding dispute resolution options within their academic institute. The field of Ombuds has grown steadily in North America since the 1970s and is widely used by private industry, academia, and government organizations to deploy alternative dispute resolution techniques, an often cheaper and more successful means of conflict resolution compared to the traditional litigious approach. Identifying how ombuds approach promoting change requires understanding the dispute resolution system and the conditions that produce conflict. Based on interviews with 10 current university ombuds officers from a variety of higher education institutions, this explorative qualitative study presents data to answer three main research questions: How do University Ombuds approach change agency within their institution? What specific actions do ombuds take to promote change? How do University Ombuds approach different sub-organizations when attempting to drive change within their institutions? Methods of analysis included an ontological system mapping process and utilizes multi-tier coding to induce themes that address the research questions and provide a holistic understanding of how ombuds approach dispute resolution change agency. Results identified the utility of positional authority and soft power to provide conflict resolution alternatives and highlights various tools ombuds use to serve as change agents within their organizations.

Chapter 1: Introduction

Conflict is unavoidable. Conflict is widespread. Conflict is expensive. These are accepted truths about conflict and the effects it has on the modern workplace. It has been noted at length that conflict resolution in the workplace accounts for anywhere from 20-80 percent of a manager's time, time which could be better utilized to reach organizational goals (Cloke & Goldsmith, 2011). In addition to the obvious setbacks and effects conflict can have on an organization, there are also tangible and calculated costs that are incurred by the organization associated with conflict. These costs include defined expenses such as legal fees and settlements but also costs associated with loss of customers and employee retention including damage to corporate reputations and the brand name (Raines, 2013). Many managers feel ill-equipped to handle conflict in the workplace due to a lack of investment on the organization's part, and trend analysis indicates that the lack of conflict management in the workplace and the toll of conflict on organizations is only getting worse (Raines, 2013).

Conflict is temporary. Conflict can be productive. Conflict should be addressed. Although it can feel like the task of conflict resolution is unsurmountable at times, there are ways organizations can approach conflict that do not involve lengthy litigation and costly court proceedings. Alternative Dispute Resolution (ADR) is a growing field that has proven its value as the preferred option for addressing conflict in the workplace. ADR refers to any procedure that utilizes a neutral party to help the conflicting sides address their issues to come to a mutually agreed-upon outcome that avoids the use of the legal system (U.S. Department of Labor, 2022). The most popular ADR approaches taken by organizations today include negotiation, mediation, and arbitration (Erbe, 2019, p.12). Unlike mediation and arbitration, which are established processes for conflict resolution, ombuds can take on many forms within an organization and the

utilization of ombuds and ombuds offices in both the public and private sectors has steadily grown over the past 35 years (Ziegenfuss & O'Rourke, p.2, 2011). Ombuds is a position or office within an organization that is established with the intent of resolving conflicts and complaints in an informal, independent manner often without formal authority. They can impact organizations in many ways, including improving the quality of working life and productivity as well as supporting organizational development (Ziegenfuss & O'Rourke, p.1, 2011). They are considered conflict resolution specialists and can offer ADR solutions to problems as well as provide training to improve conflict resolution skills amongst the organization's workforce.

There is no singular approach ombuds take as the requirements of the role are very fluid based on the organization's needs. In fact, there are many discrepancies amongst ombuds regarding the positional responsibilities, hiring practices, the degree of informality ombuds deploy, and their approach to relationship building across an organization (Byer, 2017). However, one commonality all ombuds share is the lack of formal authority. Ombuds are often charged with investigating, addressing, or recommending action to informally resolve conflicts but they carry no supervisory or managerial authority or ability to leverage consequences against protagonists of an issue or even to mandate that parties participate in ADR processes such as mediation. This presents possibly the biggest challenge to ombuds and is addressed differently based on organizational support to the office as well as the ombuds personalities themselves. Observing and understanding a conflict is the first step in resolving it but turning observation into action requires a skillset that often goes overlooked.

Problem Statement

The following research was conducted to understand how organizational ombuds serve as agents of change within an organization with the expectation of identifying commonalities in

ombuds' approach to conflict resolution within their organizations. The research was conducted in an ontological systems mapping process based on interviewing university ombuds professionals. This is not meant to serve as an ombud "how to" guide, though the material and trends explored and identified should assist professionals in understanding successful ombuds approaches in the university setting. Instead, it highlights university ombuds' best practices and how those practices enable them to be successful, effective agents of change within their organization. This research also explored how Ombuds approach different sub-organizations and members of the university, i.e. students, faculty, staff, and leadership, highlighting both differences and similarities in the Ombuds approach to promote change within their organization. Success was defined by the participants themselves in this research. It is impossible and would be unfair to apply a blanket framework of success to each participant because the support they provide to their organizations can vary based on university needs. Instead, part of the interview process will focus on identifying what meaningful milestones ombuds strive towards and how they approach meeting their goals.

Research Questions

The research attempted to provide answers to three addressals, or central Research Questions (RQ). The first addressal is the main research question (RQ1):

Addressal 1: *How do University Ombuds approach change agency within their institution?*

Additionally, the other two addressals were (RQ2 & RQ3):

Addressal 2: *What specific actions do Ombuds take to promote change within their institutions?*

Addressal 3: *How do University Ombuds approach sub-organizations when attempting to drive change within their institution?*

The difference between Addressal 1 and 2 is primarily the focus of ombuds acting as change agents. Where the first addressal is captures sources of power form which ombuds derive their ability to act to promote change and highlights “big picture” concepts, the second addressal is focused on tangible actions to promote change and views ombuds’ approach more granular in detail. The final addressal focuses on how ombuds approach working with and promoting change with the different university populations, or sub-organizations, which includes students, faculty, staff, and university leaders.

To elucidate the addressals, sub-questions where identified to gather a holistic understanding of ombuds approach to change agency. These sub-questions were based on the basic understanding of what the roles and responsibilities of an ombuds is, which is presented in the Chapter 2 Literature Review. The final chapter presents findings and answers to the three addressals. The following are sub-questions associated to each Addressal:

Addressal 1: Big Picture (RQ1)

- What are Ombuds’ primary sources of influence to promote change?
- What drives success for ombuds?
- What major factors influence how an ombuds can approach promoting change?

Addressal 2: Granular Actions (RQ2)

- How can ombuds leverage relationships to meet goals?
- What specific actions enable ombuds to perform their duties and responsibilities associated with the roles to promote change?
- What influences the rhythm of ombuds on a day-to-day scale?

Addressal 3: Approaching Sub-Organizations (RQ3)

- How does change agency vary between university sub-organizations and populations?

- Do ombuds rely on different souces of influence when working with different sub-organizations within the university?
- How do challenges associated with the different sub-organizations vary?

Interview questions were established to operationalize the main and sub-research questions, the answers provided the desired holistic understanding of how ombuds approach change agency. For a list of Interview questions and which Addressals they are associated with, see Appendix A.

Social Theories and Key Terms

Three theoretical frameworks were applied to amplify understanding and explain possible trends and patterns that may be identified through data analysis. A major factor of workplace conflict and the ombuds' potential for success is the organizational culture and the systems established within an organization. Theories that were applied to the understanding of organizational conflict management as it relates to ombuds as agents of change include:

- **Systems Theory** is used to help explain how an environment functions and why certain results are reached by viewing the cause and effect through a lens of interconnected elements serving a function or purpose.
- **Change Theory** explains the stages an organization and its members traverse as it enacts meaningful and permanent change. Theoretical modeling highlights actions required and pitfalls to avoid when deliberately changing organizational behaviors.
- **Organizational Culture Theory** supports the understanding of how organizations establish and develop their norms and values, and how culture influences the accepted behaviors of its members.

Key Terms that were explored and highlighted in this research include:

- **Cross-Cultural Leadership** teams need to understand how their personal biases may affect others within their organization, and it behooves them to seek education and training on such perceptions (Erbe, 2019, p.57). This is especially important in an environment as diverse as a university setting. Ombuds officers can provide training as preventative measures against potential cultural conflicts.
- **Alternative Dispute Resolution (ADR)** refers to means of resolving conflicts that do not include the legal system. Often ADR includes conflict resolution processes such as arbitration, mediation, or facilitation. Ombuds are usually neutral, third-party actors that utilize ADR techniques to resolve conflict.
- **Ombuds** is a person or office within an organization that serves as an informal conflict specialist often charged with investigating, resolving, advising, or educating the organization about conflict resolution and preemptive training (Olson-Buchanan and Boswell, p.324, 2008; Ziegenfuss & O'Rourke, p.23, 2011).
- **Organizational Ombuds** often serves as an informal alternative to conflict management within corporations, agencies, and academic institutions, that utilize various ADR techniques to the benefit of the organization; the main distinction between Organizational Ombuds and **Classical (or Executive) Ombuds** is that the latter wields a degree of legislative power, performing in a quasi-legal role with varying degrees of formal power (Erbe, 2019, p.42).
- **Avoidance** is utilized by individuals or organizations that lack both assertiveness and empathy, preferring not to deal with conflict and having lower concern for relationships and outcomes, leading to struggles balancing the give-and-take of

conflict. This is the most common reaction to conflict in the workplace. (Runde & Flanagan, 2010; Runde, 2014; Goldfien & Robbennolt, 2013)

- **Framing and reframing** are approaches to problem-solving or conflict resolution that consider an issue from different perspectives or lenses. It is a mental mapping technique that develops alternative diagnoses and strategies by highlighting various assumptions and considering various points of view (Bolman and Deal, p.6-12, 2017; Katz and Wahlgren, 2022, p.104).
- **Coordinated Management of Meaning** is part of Communication theory that details the step-by-step process of communication, including the use of both verbal and non-verbal cues and symbols to send, receive, and interpret the intended meaning within a bound cultural framework (Katz, Lawyer, & Sweedler, 2010, p.1-2; Erbe, 2019, p.65)
- **Conflict Coaching** helps individuals develop personal conflict resolution and ADR abilities, which can include negotiation and mediation skills, and increases their understanding of conflicts to positively manage situations and issues (Jones & Brinkert, 2008, p.4-5).
- **Organizational Citizenship** is the sense of belonging and buy-in members have in their organization; it can be measured by the willingness of an organization's members to go beyond their immediate position's expectations, limits, and reward systems to benefit the entire workplace (Erbe, 2019, p.78).
- **Social Capital** refers to the amount of non-material power or influence one has based on their social network within and outside of a group (Ritzer, 2007, p.178; May & Powell, 2008, p.127-129)

- **Conflict Systems** or **Conflict Management Systems** are sometimes created and implemented by ombuds to help organizations effectively prevent and manage conflict. Ombuds officers provide training or coaching to members, helping improve conflict management skills across the organization (Erbe, 2019, p.105 &118).
- The **International Ombuds Association (IOA)** is a professional organization for ombuds officers established to advance organizational ombuds and establish standards across the industry. Their goal is to advocate for an ombuds office in all organizations. (International Ombuds Association, 2022).
- **Action** is a deliberate and meaningful activity of an individual or group, whereas **Behavior** is a natural response that occurs with little to no thought and no considered meaning behind it (Ritzer, 2007, p29). Actions are often based on one or multiple **rationalities** as outlined by Weber, including practical, theoretical, substantive, and formal (Ritzer, 2007, p.31).
- **Third-Party Decision Control** refers to five intervention strategies available to a third party, such as a mediator or ombuds officer, based on the level of control they exercise over both the decision and process (Goldman, Cropanzano, Stein, & Benson, 2012).

Workplace conflict culture is at the heart of this study and the aptitude of ombuds to manage conflict positively and productively within their organizations, as well as the systemic drivers of conflict in the workplace. This research lays the foundation for future academic endeavors focused on the effectiveness of ombuds within other sectors of the workforce. It contributes to the limited awareness of specific commonalities amongst approaches Ombuds at

universities take to successfully instill change within their organization and contributes to the growth and effectiveness of future ombuds as agents of change within their organizations.

Chapter 2: Literature Review and Theoretical Framing

This chapter explores concepts and current publications focused on conflict and organization, an overview of the ombuds position, Ombuds strengths and weaknesses, and the position's relationship to culture within an organization. It concludes with the exploration of two theoretical frameworks, systems theory and change theory, relevant to ombuds as agents of organizational change.

Organizational Conflict, Cost, and Responses

Conflict and Organizations

Conflict can come in many forms and can arise gradually over time or instantaneously. Although people understand what conflict entails, it is nevertheless important to define the meaning in a scope that was utilized for this paper. Pruitt and Kim offer a solid foundational concept of conflict when they state that "conflict means perceived divergence of interest, a belief that the parties' current aspirations are incompatible" with each other (2004, p.8). Schellenberg utilizes the term social conflict and describes it as a conflict between or within individuals or groups, where the conflict arises from competing interests or different identities or attitudes (1996, p.8). Avruch takes the term conflict a step further in saying that "conflict occurs when two related parties- individuals, groups, communities, or nation-states- find themselves divided by perceived incompatible interests or goals or in competition for control of scarce resources" (2013, p.24-25). Borrowing from each of these definitions, for the sake of this paper conflict is defined as a disagreement between two or more parties based on their respective competing needs where the perceived results are incompatible with each other.

Workplace conflict can carry the same overarching meaning of conflict; however, it is more limited in scope as it focuses on a specific type of conflict, based on location and interests.

Dana describes workplace conflict as “a condition between or among workers whose jobs are interdependent, who feel angry, who perceive the other(s) as being at fault, and who act in ways that cause a business problem” (2001, p.5). Dana brings in the concept of emotion to conflict, which is valid because much of what drives perceptions of incompatibility stems from human emotions. It is also important to highlight that individuals or groups are interdependent. In workplace conflict, the parties are in some way dependent on each other to help achieve the organization’s stated goals, e.g., to make the most profit or to best serve the customer.

Conflict, and specifically workplace conflict, can also take many forms based on the participants and competing values. This chapter has already touched on the many levels of conflict, from individuals to groups of varying sizes to nations and large organizations. Interpersonal conflicts occur between individuals, intergroup conflicts occur between groups, and intragroup conflicts occur within a group. Current literature identifies many drivers and conditions of conflict that contribute to the development of interpersonal, intergroup, and intragroup conflicts. Parties often find themselves in conflict when their perceptions of a given situation are not compatible. Drivers of conflict include interests, needs, identity, desires, values, and rights (Rioux & Redekop, 2013, p.4). Conditions of conflict include scarcity of a resource, security, distrust, ambiguity and inconsistency, lack of consensus, and competition (Pruitt & Kim, 2004, p.21-26).

It is important to remember that conflict does not happen in a vacuum. Conflicts are the results of a situation at a specific time, in a specific place, fueled by the actions of the parties involved that are acting within their bounding conditions and limitations (Kelly, 2020). People within the organization either create or encounter conflict based on the environment established

within their specific organization and it behooves the organization's members to foster an environment where destructive conflict is addressed and minimized.

Despite the negative connotation and feelings associated with conflict, it should instead be viewed as a mechanism for positive change. Conflict can lead to innovation and creativity and drive improved decision-making. This is achieved through more robust discussions and increased vetting and information sharing about the issue at hand. Additionally, increased discussion about an issue leads to a solution where parties share ownership over the solution, increasing motivation for the agreed-upon terms to succeed (Runde, 2014). Other aspects of conflict that often go unnoticed or undervalued include its ability to illuminate the priorities, needs, and goals of an individual, group, or organization and to highlight the differences between parties. Recognizing the differences between parties allows for greater cooperation and productivity and less sustained conflict (McKenzie, 2002).

It has been proven that conflicts result in the most benefits when addressed early. American psychologist Elias H. Porter outlined three phases of conflict that are widely recognized today in what is referred to as Relationship Awareness Theory. In the first phase, the conflict has greater potential for positive results through constructive discussion and debate as the parties focus on the concern for one's self, the problem, and the other; in the second phase the parties shift to self-prioritization where objectivity begins to falter and the focus is no longer on the other party, and as parties enter the final phase of conflict they entrench themselves in their respective positions and risk the conflict becoming destructive and personal as the focus is squarely on one's self (Porter, 1973 & 1996). This helps underscore the importance of recognizing and addressing conflict early, before it shifts to the latter phases, to benefit from a constructive conflict (Eksteen, 2016).

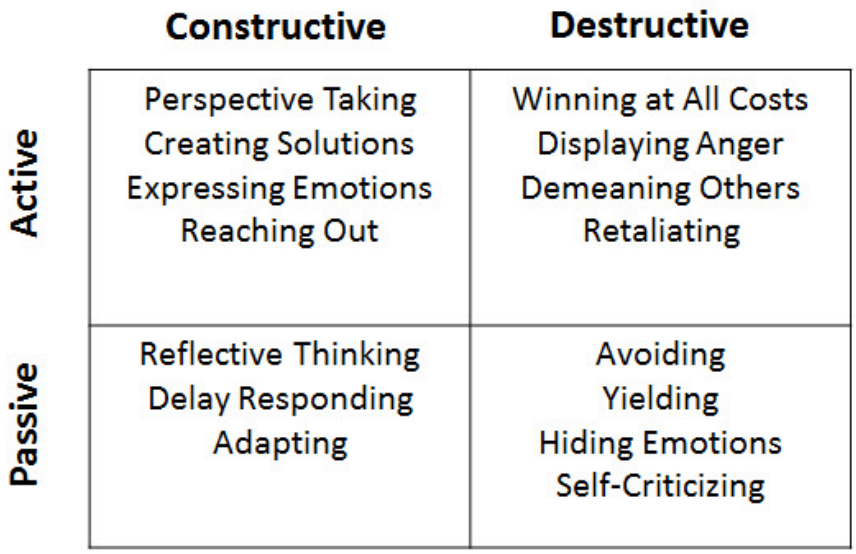
Conflict Responses

Conflict responses are as diverse as the people confronted with a difficult situation, and there are many ways in which conflict can be addressed. The Dual-Concerns model identifies the conflict style an individual naturally gravitates towards but does not consider the actions and behaviors of individuals. A person's reaction to a conflict is either constructive or destructive, and either active or passive (Center for Conflict Dynamics, 2015). These reactions are evident in an organization's conflict culture through the behaviors, or reactions to conflict, of its members. Active and passive responses are independent of a response being considered constructive or destructive, meaning neither active responses nor passive responses will always escalate or de-escalate a conflict. Active and passive responses are simply approaches or an individual's behavior towards a conflict. The Center for Conflict Dynamics (CCD) at Eckerd College describes the four categories as:

- *Constructive Response: Non-escalating behavior that works to end the conflict.*
- *Destructive Response: Conflict-escalating behavior leads to more issues.*
- *Active Response: The conflicting party intentionally works toward resolving the conflict.*
- *Passive Response: Decision to let the conflict run its course with minimal interference.*

Figure 1

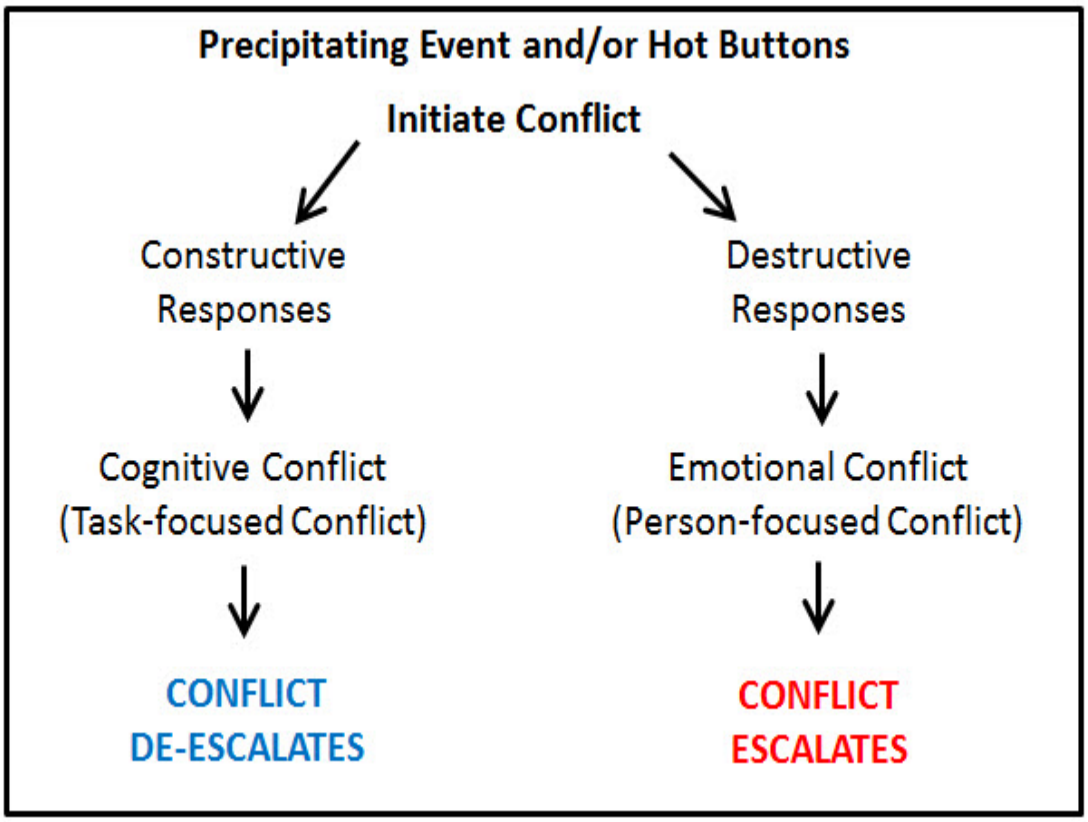
Conflict Response Chart



The CCD asserts that conflict is inevitable, but that early in the conflict process parties take either a constructive or destructive approach to addressing the issue. The precipitating event is the origin of the conflict, such as competing goals, needs, and desires to name a few, and the early responses to the conflict will determine if the conflict will be constructive or destructive, as well as if the conflict will be cognitive in nature or emotional, and ultimately whether the early management of the conflict will lead to an escalation or de-escalation of the conflict (Ziegler, 2021).

Figure 2

Conflict Escalation Paths



As noted, the CCD delineated two different types of conflict, cognitive and emotional. Cognitive conflicts are focused on a disagreement of ideas and philosophies, and not on personalities, individuals, or groups. These types of conflicts are generally easier to resolve because they are not personal. Emotional conflicts are the opposite, where the conflict is focused on people and less on process or approach. These conflicts are more personal and harder to resolve constructively. The CCD states that "the goal of conflict management should be to try to minimize the occurrence and escalation of emotional conflict, but to allow the useful forms of cognitive conflict to unfold" (Center for Conflict Dynamics, 2015, p.8).

Hot buttons, or trigger events, elicit negative or destructive responses to a situation that can lead to or escalate a conflict; understanding one's hot button issues allows one to develop action or response plans for when one feels triggered (Markoff, 2019). When data is collected on a larger scale within an organization, individuals' responses can be compiled and conflict patterns can emerge. Identifying patterns and responses are then used as a snapshot of where an individual or organization is and makes it easier for participants (or leadership within an organization) to map out a path to where they want to be, as indicated by an organization's desired cultural norms and values (Conflict Dynamics Profile, n.d.).

Cost of Conflict

There is always a cost associated with conflict. On an individual level, the cost could be the heaviest on a person's emotional and physical well-being. At the organizational level, the cost of conflict can greatly influence the productivity and potential financial gains associated with chronic workplace conflict. In negative work environments, there is often greater turnover, leading to a loss of institutional knowledge and increased costs in training recruits (Berson, 2013). Increasing conflict competence in the workplace will improve the organization's culture and increase morale, which decreases both turnover and the potential for lawsuits, saving the organization time and money (Fick-Cooper & Baker, 2011). As Runde bluntly addressed the cost of conflict, "Adults will not put effort into developing skills unless it results in benefits they care about" (Runde, 2014). Increasing conflict management skills and the conflict culture of an organization will directly result in an improved bottom line, something all organizations and companies care about.

Employees in non-supervisory roles average between 2-3 hours a week addressing conflict (Eksteen, 2016; Hayes, 2008). That number may not sound like much but accounts for

over 5% of employees' work week. Imagine what the reaction would be if an employer cut salaries by 5% to compensate for the lost production time due to conflict in the workplace. On the other hand, imagine what the reaction would be if an employer raised salaries by 5% because of the increased productivity due to effective conflict management. To quantify that statement in financial terms, a 2008 study of US employees equated the cost of conflict in the workplace to almost $360 billion in average annual salaries alone (Raines, 2013). These costs did not take into consideration legal fees nor lost business or profits due to customer dissatisfaction, according to a British study the cost of legal fees and lost profits was calculated at an additional $52 billion in lost revues with about 20% stemming from legal fees and the rest from customer dissatisfaction (Amble, 2006). Studies have also shown that managers spend between 20 - 80% of their time managing conflicts in the workplace (Cloke & Goldsmith, 2011**;** Graziano & Jensen-Campbell, 2005; Kohlrieser, 2007**;** Lattuch & Young, 2011; Runde, 2014; Spicer, 2011; Thomas & White, 2011). Managers tend to make more money and having them spend a fifth of their time on conflict management is a burden on both the manager and the organization. It is also noted that within government organizations, there is a direct correlation between decreasing an organization's budget and the frequency of staff conflicts (Fick-Cooper & Baker, 2011).

Within organizations, there is a strong relationship between conflict and stress. In the article titled *Developing a CCO (Conflict Competent Organization)*, Director of Conflict Management NZ Colin McKenzie states, "Conflict creates stress, which increases sensitivity and susceptibility to conflict, which in turn increases stress. High stress often leads to more destructive conflict." (McKenzie, 2002). Stress not only leads to conflict but absenteeism and presenteeism as well as formal and informal grievances and complaints and potentially violence and lawsuits in the workplace, increasing the cost of conflict management and decreasing overall

productivity (Runde, 2014). According to a 2016 report released by the Global Corporation Challenge, presenteeism was estimated to cost ten times more than absenteeism around the world (Smith, 2016). The results of the report were validated against the widely accepted World Health Organization's (WHO) Workplace Health and Productivity Questionnaire and estimated that the cost of absenteeism to companies is around $150 billion every year and that presenteeism, which can be more challenging to calculate, costs businesses upwards of $1.5 trillion per year (Smith, 2016). The report's findings support what current literature already implies about the relationship between absenteeism and presenteeism, namely that the latter is more costly on a day-to-day basis (Lloyd, 2016).

Dr. Daniel Dana itemizes potential costs of conflict as wasted time, bad decisions, lost employees, unnecessary restructuring, sabotage (including theft and damages), lowered job motivation, lost work time, and health costs (Dana, 2001). Berens (2010) noted that there is a direct cost of lost work due to stress-related illness associated with interpersonal conflicts. Improving conflict cultures reduces negative and egocentric responses, which are deconstructive behaviors and lead to conflict escalation (Ramarajan et al, 2004).

The investment in increasing conflict management skills and improving the conflict culture of an organization not only mitigates the many potential costs associated with conflict in the workplace but also brings about positive change within the organization. Research indicates that problem-solving skills improve within the workforce, as does communication, and relationship management to include team cohesiveness, and offices with positive conflict management behaviors are more likely to achieve objectives (Gross and Guerrero, 2000). As recently as 2011, the three most commonly used ADR techniques within an organization to address conflict are mediation, ombuds, and arbitration (Erbe, 2019, p.33).

Conflict Management Education

It has been proven that when trained individuals in conflict management skills find themselves in a conflicting situation, they are much more likely to resolve the conflict constructively than those without training (Ramarajan, Bezrukova, Jehn, Euwema, & Kop, 2004; Waithaka, Moore-Austin, & Gitimu, 2015). As stated in the introduction, conflict culture, or conflict competence, refers to the ability of members of a group to resolve either inter- or intra-group conflict.

Conflict education should not be a novel concept for some employees. As early as the year 2000, almost 15% of all public schools offered some form of conflict education to their students (Jones & Bodtker, 2000). In schools, conflict education is usually focused on three aspects of conflict (affective, behavioral, and cognitive) and helps students recognize the nature and emotions of conflict and develop problem-solving strategies and behaviors to utilize when facing a conflictual situation (Bodtker, 2001).

Msila described purposeful conflict competence development as "the ability to develop and use cognitive, emotional, and behavior skills that enhance productive outcomes of conflict while reducing the likelihood of escalation of harm" (2012, p.31). It enables leaders to manage conflict and balance relationships throughout their professional careers (Waite & McKinney, 2014). Improving conflict management skills early in employees' careers will help them advance professionally and allow the organization to take advantage of their abilities, including using them to set an example for others (Runde, 2014)

According to Runde, conflict management skills are not inborn and should be fostered through education and training (Runde, 2014). Runde explains that employees and managers should strive to extract the most benefit from conflicts and highlights the need for adults to

develop affective, behavioral, and cognitive conflict management skills (Runde, 2014), just as Bodtker outlined regarding conflict education for minors. Routine conflict management training is prudent and helps to avoid prolonging issues and increasing costs associated with the potential problem (Runde, 2014). Bodtker and Runde both emphasize the importance of providing conflict management education and training earlier for individuals, whether they are students or employed professionals. Increasing awareness of one's conflict management style, understanding the implications of that style, and developing holistic conflict management skills are three important steps to conflict management education (Fick-Cooper & Baker, 2011). However, conflict management training entails not only understanding how to react in a conflictual situation but also what conditions lead to the conflict. These conditions or events are often referred to as hot buttons, and through increasing self-awareness, individuals can head off conflict before it escalates (Runde, 2014).

The importance of conflict management training is also highlighted in Thomas Pyzdek's widely circulated "The Six Sigma Handbook", with emphasis on recognizing causes of conflict (i.e., hot buttons) between members of the organization (Pyzdek & Keller, 2010). It is important for organizations to not only establish a conflict management program but also ensure it is implemented properly or it could result in decreasing morale as it reflects management's lack of emphasis on the program (Berson, 2013).

Conflict management education must go beyond academic theories and should touch on practical approaches. Identifying hot-button issues and understanding one's reaction is important, but both of those aspects of conflict management education are internal to the individual. It is important for the practitioner, the manager or leader, or the employee, to be able to utilize the knowledge through constructive engagement with other parties. Reflective listening, or listening

for understanding, is an example of how one party can proactively engage with another to constructively address a conflict. This entails summarizing what a party is saying, providing both verbal and non-verbal cues indicating that you are actively listening, and asking questions for clarification when needed (Mote, 2017). Additionally, a party's EQ and CQ and effective communication skills, including negotiation practices, are important factors that lead to successful and sustained conflict resolution (Wall & Druckman, 2002; Fetherston, 1994; Waithaka, Moore-Austin, & Gitimu, 2015). In the book "Becoming a Conflict Competent Leader", Runde and Flanagan outlined seven habits for conflict-competent managers, which can be learned and practiced to teach leaders how to constructively respond to conflict. These habits include taking different perspectives, creating solutions, expressing emotions, reaching out, thinking reflectively, delaying a response, and adapting (Runde & Flanagan, 2013). Benefits from practicing and improving these skills include creative problem-solving, expression of positive emotions, and improved conflict resolution skills (Fick-Cooper & Baker, 2011).

Ombuds and Ombuds Officers

What is Ombuds?

Much like the terms culture or conflict, definitions of the term ombuds vary among textbooks, experts, and even ombuds themselves. The ombuds position can be very nebulous and the expectations and responsibilities of an ombuds officer can vary greatly between organizations, depending on their needs. However, Raines provides an accurate and general definition of ombuds as "an organizational conflict management specialist who works to resolve either internal disputes with employees or external disputes with customers, clients, vendors, or business partners" (2013, p.415). This definition acknowledges the evolution of the position, currently identifying ombuds officers as ADR specialists. What this, and other definitions of

ombuds, lacks is an acknowledgment of no formal authority to the position. It is almost exclusively a consultancy role where members of an organization voluntarily participate in ombuds activities, including investigations, mediation, facilitation, and various forms of conflict dispute training. At any point in an investigation or during the ADR process, an employee or member of the organization has the right to seek legal counsel and enter formal litigation. Additionally, ombuds are most often autonomous from other departments and report directly to the highest levels of an organization. This affords the position freedom and discretion to investigate and inform decision-makers of their unfiltered findings to get a full understanding of the issues at hand (Ziegenfuss & O'Rourke, 2011, p.59).

The responsibilities of an ombuds officer differ significantly from those of an HR specialist and will be addressed in the upcoming section of this chapter. However, the most prolific difference between ombuds and HR is the degree of confidentiality kept at the ombuds level. In most cases, no records with personally identifiable information (PII) are kept with ombuds where, unless specified, HR often maintains detailed records of personnel interactions for legal reasons (Erbe, 2019, p.128). There are exceptions for ombuds, such as when the ombuds feel there is an imminent threat to life or serious harm and information needs to be shared at a detailed level with authorities.

Originating in Sweden, ombudsmen were originally appointed government officials charged with investigating citizen complaints against their government or government officials. The position was gradually adopted by other countries before transitioning to private sectors and industries, including academia. According to the International Ombudsman Institute, between 1983 and 2004, the number of countries employing various forms of ombuds blossomed from 21 to over 100 (International Ombudsman Institute). The growth of ombuds can be traced to the

growing expenses of litigious dispute resolution involving the courts, labor relations, and consumer complaints; cases can cost organizations both financial and human capital and can drag on for years (Ziegenfuss & O'Rourke, 2011, p.6-7, 52).

The roots of ombuds can still be found in dictionary definitions of the position, where they explain that an ombudsman is "a person who investigates and attempts to resolve complaints and problems, as between employees and an employer or between students and a university" (dictionary.com, 2022). It is worth noting that in Swedish, the term ombudsman is gender neutral but with its expanded acceptance and adaption in other languages and specifically within the context of English, the position is commonly referred to as ombuds. Within the framework of this research, the position is referred to as ombuds, and the person holding the position is referred to as the ombuds officer.

Roles and Responsibilities

Ombuds officers are conflict resolution specialists. Their responsibilities are to help an organization avoid unnecessary conflicts while effectively and fairly managing inevitable conflicts for all involved parties (Raines, 2013, p.110). Originally hired in the private industry as customer complaint managers (Ziegenfuss & O'Rourke, 2011, p.1), today's ombuds officers wear many hats, including that of counselor, consultant, coach, mediator/facilitator, educator, and trainer. Before the growth and acceptance of formal ombuds positions within an organization, ombuds officers were known as (and to an extent still are today) customer or employee relation managers, EEO and HR specialists, franchise liaisons, or special assistants to leadership (Ziegenfuss, Robbins, & Rowe, 1987, p.380).

A major responsibility ombuds officers are charged with, either formally or informally, is to increase the level of communication within an organization; it has been documented that poor

communication is a leading source of complaints within organizations (Ziegenfuss & O'Rourke, 2011, p.49-50). Ombuds can approach opening communication by encouraging and advising leaders and executives on means of becoming more transparent, while also serving as a guide for employees to find resources that include pertinent information of value (Ziegenfuss & O'Rourke, 2011, p.50).

Another expectation for many Ombuds Officers is for them to serve as an agent of change within their organization. This requires them to think in systems and advocate for processes that prioritize the well-being of people, observe patterns and trends, conduct environmental scans of the organization, and provide coaching and training to both leaders and employees (Erbe, 2019, p.141). Because of the required independence of the position from competing agendas and its degree of investigative confidentiality, ombuds can conduct surveys and assessments, and have conversations with members of the organization that leaders may not be able to have. It should be understood that Ombuds Officers take into consideration the views and well-being of all of the organization's members, and not simply address the loudest or most critical members. By doing so, Ombuds can build social capital with both the workforce and leadership, building more trust in the position and buy-in from those who might hesitate to work with ombuds because they may never have been exposed to the position previously. It is important to remember that Ombuds officers do not hold formal authority or possess the power to mandate change; they are expected to present their recommendations and findings to organizational leaders and, at times, attempt to persuade them to enact change based on their recommendations (Erbe, 2019, p.43).

Three Primary Activities of Ombuds

Although the nature of the Ombuds position varies between different organizations, it is understood that there are three primary functions the Ombuds addresses: Complaint Processing, Education and Training, and Consultation (Ziegenfuss & O'Rourke, 2011, p.48)

Based on the position's early roots, ombuds can often be responsible for complaint processing and resolution. This includes complaints filed internally by employees as well as externally by customers or partners. Complaint processing entails receiving the initial complaint, conducting fact-finding through informal investigation, developing a response, and resolving the complaint through the utilization of ADR techniques (Ziegenfuss & O'Rourke, 2011, p.23). It is also important for Ombuds to report their investigative results to leadership for awareness and, when possible, to monitor response plans to ensure parties are following through on their agreements (Ziegenfuss & O'Rourke, 2011, p.25 & p.48). Participation in an investigation by an Ombuds Officer is entirely voluntary and should be conducted discreetly at the lowest levels possible, which both serve to protect the privacy of all parties as well as to maintain the organization's public image (Ziegenfuss & O'Rourke, 2011, p.52).

As an educator, Ombuds are expected to support the workforce's understanding of organizational policies, procedures, and the rationale behind the decisions. They can also be charged with conducting "best practices" and conflict management training for employees. Training can span a wide range of topics, based on the needs of the organization and the expertise of the Ombuds, and can focus on topics from client communications to conflict prevention (Ziegenfuss & O'Rourke, 2011, p.23). Training and educational events can be conducted either formally or informally and usually focus on one of four groups of individuals: employees who submit a complaint, employees or subjects of a complaint, development of upper

management, and members of problem-response teams within the organization (Ziegenfuss & O'Rourke, 2011, p.54-55). Educational events should not only be responsive to issues or complaints that arise, but proactive by offering preparatory training to the workforce to avoid conflicts or issues before they arise; this material can focus on work attitudes, basic conflict resolution skills, and customer and employee relations (Ziegenfuss & O'Rourke, 2011, p.55). Conflict education can also encompass coaching and preparing people to manage conflict before it occurs; one approach is for Ombuds to help people understand their triggers and hot-button issues and then prepare them to manage their emotions when conflict arises.

Complementary to education, Ombuds function as advisors for upper and middle management regarding identifying potential issues and proposing actions to address situations, or to prevent issues from occurring (Ziegenfuss & O'Rourke, 2011, p.23). By providing upward feedback and guidance, Ombuds Officers allow leaders to assess the internal environment of the organization including how its members are treated, how its members perceive their treatment, and if the organization is postured to reach its goals from a membership perspective. A major factor in an Ombud's ability to consult is for them to serve as silent observers within their organization, watching for indicators and warnings of potential issues or possible opportunities for management to address. Being an observer includes acting as an early warning mechanism for leadership, providing them with the trend and pattern analysis, and includes reviewing organizational systems, monitoring the organization's climate and atmospherics, and identifying roadblocks within the organization (Ziegenfuss & O'Rourke, 2011, p.104). The Ombuds should have a direct line to decision-makers and the appropriate leaders within the organization to provide concise information and feedback to them without competing priorities or potential information filters that could skew, limit, or ignore the upward feedback.

University Ombuds

There are several types of ombuds, depending on the needs of the organization. The roles and responsibilities of ombuds as having been presented thus far are generally associated with the role of a Classic Ombuds (Stieber, 2000, p.53). These ombuds are leveraged primarily for troubleshooting and conflict resolution while maintaining a positive public image (Ziegenfuss & O'Rourke, 2011, p.7).

One type of Ombuds that has grown significantly and is very prominent across industries is the University Ombuds (which is the primary focus of this research). As early as the 1960s and in response to the perception of militant campus activities, largely considered a byproduct of the time's political and cultural atmospherics, universities and academic institutes across the country began formalizing ombuds positions on campuses (Ziegenfuss & O'Rourke, 2011, p.33). Today, many University Ombuds are charged with managing student grievances (similar to Classic Ombuds addressing customer complaints); these grievances can range from accusations of favoritism within a classroom to unfair grading practices, and other student-body concerns. Although Ombuds can and sometimes are expected to manage faculty concerns, their primary focus tends to be on student development and issues (Ziegenfuss & O'Rourke, 2011, p.33). Faculty complaints and concerns could instead be addressed by a separate faculty ombuds, someone with more experience managing employee grievances. However, many times the faculty ombuds position is a collateral duty and not the primary function of an appointed ombuds officer. When universities ask faculty to play a dual role, it can serve as a warning to others that the office, to no fault of the ombuds officer, may not meet the professional ethical standards expected of independent ombuds offices due to competing interests and agendas (Erbe, 2019, p.43).

Challenges of Ombuds

Holding the position of Ombuds can be both very rewarding and very challenging at the same time. Because Ombuds positions vary greatly, each position presents unique challenges to the role and organization. However, regardless of the industry or sector in which Ombuds find themselves, there are three challenges shared across the work role: functioning independently and without involvement from others, remaining impartial or neutral when addressing conflict or organizational issues, and maintaining confidentiality throughout the Ombuds process (Ziegenfuss & O'Rourke, 2011, p.41).

A valid question asked by employees and those within an organization that may be hesitant to work with an Ombuds is how they can be independent (or neutral) when they are paid employees of the organization. If the ombuds answer to some form of organizational management, can they truly be considered independent or trusted to remain neutral throughout the ADR process? How can someone remain neutral if they are not considered fully independent? There is no easy solution to addressing these questions but deploying and skillfully utilizing reflective practices can help manage perceptions and expectations when working with members of an organization; these practices should take a whole-of-organization approach, from reflecting on the organization and systems to teams and structures, and down to the individual level (Erbe, 2019, p.54).

Independence

The question of independence is most concerning in the event of an ombuds investigation, or if the prescribed resolution to an issue is not perceived by an employee or customer to be in their favor. Although it is possible to bring in third-party arbiters to address this issue, having the Ombuds be a member of the organization can also be very beneficial. As a

member of the organization, the Ombuds can easily or has already cracked the cultural code of the organization. They should have a deep understanding of the organization, its history, the established culture, and the atmospherics that an outsider could not easily understand or pick up (Ziegenfuss & O'Rourke, 2011, p.42). An effective Ombuds has also established relationships and identified key players within the various levels and work roles of the organization in which they serve, and informal interactions can help build social capital within the organization.

Neutrality

Gadlin and Pino identify three major dimensions of neutrality that ombuds are faced with: the definition itself of neutrality, the ombuds' institutional location, and their interactions and perception management within the organization (2007). Although an Ombuds Officer strives to remain neutral in that they do not favor any side of a dispute and that the focus of the Ombudsman should remain on a balanced process, the term neutrality can invite unwarranted criticism by one of the parties of the ADR process if their expectations are not met (Rowe, 1987, p.128). Some Ombuds have started to reframe their stance from neutral to impartial, or even multi-partial, which is representative of the conscious inclusion and equal rights and treatment of all parties in the system or resolution process (Erbe, 2019, p.54). This shift in framing is not simply to placate critics of neutrality but involves exercising reflective practices on the part of the ombuds, including identifying and challenging personal biases and internal barriers of both the parties and of the ombuds themselves. Reflective practices at the individual level allow the parties to not only understand and identify their own biases but also allow them the insight of viewing themselves from the other party's perspective and to understand the biases that the other party may bring to the discussion. Gaining commitment from organizational leaders and members to address biases and open their minds to other points of view (which is easier said than

done), allows parties to shift from entrenching themselves in their original position and focusing on the needs of all parties involved (Gadlin & Pino, 2007). This approach is widely used in negotiation and mediation and applies to most ADR situations.

In addition to reflective practices at different levels, it is important for the ombuds to also establish an atmosphere of facilitative listening. Facilitative listening, sometimes referred to as active listening, allows for one party to hear and understand the other party's ideas, whether they agree or not (Active Presence, n.d.). It is important that the Ombuds Officer conveys their impartiality throughout the process and is not perceived as straying from understanding a point to supporting, agreeing, or disagreeing with one party or the other, even unintentionally, as that could damage the Ombud's credibility within the discussion and even organization (Erbe, 2019, p.127).

Another key to Ombuds' impartially is their ability to balance perceived power between leaders and members of the organization, either during investigations, conflict resolutions, or any other aspects within the span of an Ombuds authority (Erbe, 2019, p.40-41). This includes Ombuds removing themselves from situations where, even if it is only based on unfair perceptions by one party, they cannot maintain a neutral stance free of conflicts of interest or perceived biases. Ombuds should be upfront with members of the organization they serve concerning past experiences and relationships that could influence (or perceive to influence) the outcome of an investigation.

Confidentiality

As discussed, two of the primary charges of an Ombuds Officer are to investigate concerns and to identify emerging trends in leadership. Building social capital is important because the more capital one has accrued within the organization, the more members of the

organization are more willing to participate in conversations and processes directly tied to investigations and trend analysis. It can be challenging for Ombuds to present information about difficult issues to an organization's leaders, not only because the nature of difficult issues is usually unwelcomed by and uncomfortable for many, but it can also put Ombuds in an ethical dilemma. Leaders may press the Ombuds for more information than an Ombuds should or is willing to share. It behooves the Ombuds to act in a manner that will protect the rights and interests of all parties within an organization, including at times the identities of those involved in discussions and investigations. Ombuds professionals must develop a reputation within the organization based on effectiveness and integrity when addressing difficult situations (Erbe, 2019, p.144). Maintaining confidentiality is an ethical necessity for Ombuds Officers and directly relates to the integrity of their work. One way ombuds personnel maintain confidentiality is by limiting formal and detailed documentation of an organization's members during investigations and conversations, which is contrary to what HR professionals are expected to do.

Ombuds Officers strive to remain balanced and impartial throughout the execution of all of their responsibilities, from resolving conflicts and investigating issues to identifying trends and providing training opportunities for the organization. To perform at their best, Ombuds need to proactively address the challenges they face, including questions of independence, neutrality, and confidentiality.

Additional Challenges

In addition to the above-mentioned challenges, many Ombuds Officers share challenges related to their lack of formal authority, addressing conflict avoidance within an organization, and addressing potential cultural conflicts within the organization. These are no less important

than remaining independent, impartial, and protecting confidential information and each requires a degree of skill from the Ombuds position to address effectively.

A lack of formal authority could be considered a weakness or challenge for Ombuds officers. They cannot mandate anyone to participate in their investigations, attend their development sessions, or adhere to their ADR processes. They can present plans of action to address trends, but they cannot force change within the organization. They are also not expected to force change or mandate participation. Ombuds are agents of change and must leverage other means than formal authority to enact change.

Another challenge faced by ombuds is tackling conflict avoidance. As noted in the previous chapter, avoidance is the most common reaction to workplace conflict. It is easier for members of an organization to refrain from complaining or bringing to light an issue for fear of retribution, retaliation, or future relationship management. Instead, members of an organization will avoid confrontation and either accept the status quo and remain unsatisfied within the organization, not accept the status quo and move on from the organization, or destructively approach conflict resolution to alter the status quo in their favor. Many people will only complain when driven by extraordinarily bad behavior or when their interests are being threatened (Ziegenfuss & O'Rourke, 2011, p.44). Ombuds officers face the daunting task of challenging conventional approaches to avoiding conflict in favor of creating a culture of acceptance and openness where members of an organization are less reluctant to bring up issues in their nascent stages before they compound to become major events and conflicts.

Culture and cultural conflict will be addressed in the next section of this chapter, but it warrants mention as a challenge for Ombuds Officers to overcome. Whether it is a multi-national corporation or a local club, cultural, and intercultural conflict can play a major factor in the

success of an organization. One of the major issues organizations face regarding cultural differences is miscommunication and misinterpretation of information in a manner that was not intended. Members of an organization from different cultural backgrounds, ranging from national heritage to socioeconomic status, will communicate in different ways or use different verbiage to convey their messages based on their cultural characteristics and social backgrounds (Erbe, 2019, p.56). The Ombuds professional is sometimes required to act as an intermediary or translator between parties of varying cultures to ensure that messages are being communicated and received accurately. Reflection and active listening are tools that ombuds can use to help support intercultural exchanges.

Organizational Culture and Ombuds

Culture

Conflict is often a topic at work that people do not want to discuss. It is widely viewed as negative and is often something many people find easier to avoid than confront. How conflict is addressed is often a result of the culture that the organization has established. Conflict culture is a subculture within the organization's dominant culture and includes employees' and leaders' ability to manage conflict, drivers behind workplace conflict, and the perceptions of conflict management within an organization. Conflict is inevitable in the workplace for a variety of reasons and based on how one manages that conflict it can either be a positive, constructive experience for the organization or a negative, destructive one. By improving an organization's conflict culture through training, the workforce to manage conflict appropriately and constructively, while also identifying and mitigating systemic conflict generators, organizations will limit the cost of conflict and time wasted managing conflict.

To understand how an organization can improve its conflict culture, it is important to define what organizational culture is, as well as what drives conflict in the workplace. When conducting culture studies, it is clear that no single definition of culture exists. However, a commonly referred to definition, which is used in the context of this paper, was penned by Theodore Schwartz and states:

> Culture consists of the derivations of experience, more or less organized, learned, or created by the individuals of a population, including those images or encodements and their interpretations (meanings) transmitted from past generations, from contemporaries, or formed by individuals themselves. (Avruch, 1998, p.17)

Avruch leans heavily on Schwartz's definition of culture through his studies and publications but highlights three specific observations that are needed to supplement Schwartz. He notes that "culture is socially distributed across a population… culture is psychologically distributed within individuals across a population… culture is always situational, flexible, and responsive to the exigencies of the worlds that individuals confront" (Avruch, 2013, p.11). Based on these definitions, culture can be viewed as the evolving culmination of one's lived experiences coupled with the influences from others distributed both within and across populations.

It is important to note that although these definitions of culture focus more on individuals, organizational culture is heavily influenced by the population within the group itself. Definitions of organizational culture are also similar yet varied within the academic field of organizational behavior and conflict resolution. Greenberg provides the most basic of definitions in that organizational culture is defined as a "cognitive framework consisting of assumptions and values shared by organization members" (Greenberg, 2010, p.341). In their book titled *Cultures*

and Organizations, Hofstede, Hofstede, and Minkov explained organizational culture as "the collective programming of the mind that distinguishes the members of one group or category of people from another" where culture is learned and derived from the social environment, as opposed to inherited or innate (2010, p.6). Edgar Schein provides the most encompassing definition of organizational culture, which highlights the major themes of both Greenberg and Hofstede and Minkov, by explaining:

> The culture of a group can be defined as the accumulated shared learning of that group as it solves its problems of external adaptation and internal integration; which has worked well enough to be considered valid and, therefore, to be taught to new members as the correct way to perceive, think, feel, and behave in relation to those problems. This accumulated learning is a pattern or system of beliefs, values, and behavioral norms that come to be taken for granted as basic assumptions and eventually drop out of awareness. (Schein, 2017, p.6)

The culture is ingrained in the fabric of the organization and is often taken for granted (Greenberg, 2010, p.341). When attempting to understand an organization's culture, Schein identifies three levels of potential analysis: Artifacts, Espoused Beliefs and Values, and Basic Underlying Assumptions (2017, p.18). Artifacts are visible and concrete traits of the organization, ranging from dress codes to floor plans to organizational structures and defined roles. Espoused beliefs include the organization's goals and values encompassed in its ideology and observed through its rationalizations. Basic underlying assumptions include the taken-for-granted beliefs that Greenberg alluded to. Schein highlights the shared learning experiences within an organization as a major contributor to the culture it fosters and how this knowledge gets passed through the organization over time, similar to what Avruch stated about individual

culture being passed from generation to generation. Just as individuals are unique based on their experiences, so too are organizations and it takes time for an organization to learn and grow together to achieve its optimal culture.

Toxic organizational cultures occur when members do not feel valued (Greenberg, 2010, p.342). They experience a higher degree of conflict and turnover; if an organization suddenly experiences an increase in employees leaving, it is likely time for the organization to reevaluate its possibly deteriorating culture. However, healthy organizations tend to have very low turnover rates and higher employee morale, which can influence the organization's bottom line (Greenberg, 2010, p.342).

The value of understanding other cultures and being culturally aware has become more evident with the recognition of cultural intelligence, or CQ. Cultural Intelligence refers to the ability of an individual to both comprehend and adapt to situations with people or within organizations based on context and a variety of cues. Considered by some to be a continuation of Emotional Intelligence (EQ), an individual's CQ is thought to influence greater situational behavior than their conflict style when facing a challenge or difficult interaction (Basogul & Özgür, 2016). Understanding communal expectations, behavioral boundaries, and acceptable norms allows people with a greater CQ to respond appropriately to cultural conflict (Kelly, 2020). Cultural Intelligence should not be limited through the lens of nationality, heritage, or other social constructs but should include organizational cultures that can be equally unique and influential on an individual or group as a national identity. CQ focuses primarily on understanding the culture of others and then using that understanding to effectively interact within the group in a positive manner (Kelly, 2020).

Ombuds' Effects on Organizational Culture

Ombuds officers are organizational influencers in three specific key areas: quality of working life, productivity, and organizational development (Ziegenfuss & O'Rourke, 2011, p.1). They identify and investigate challenges and sources of conflict within an organization and can make recommendations to executives and leaders to address issues. Examples of these issues include personnel problems within the workforce or shared obstacles to productivity faced by employees. Ombuds officers can offer training and create development opportunities internal to the workforce to prepare to address their challenges appropriately. A successful ombuds officer can directly influence the culture of an organization and serve as a positive change agent through leveraging relationships, taking a proactive stance on positive change, and acting as a neutral advocate for the workforce. This is all achievable despite the lack of formal authority the position intentionally lacks.

An organization's culture, whether artificially fostered or naturally evolved, will be reflected in its dispute resolution system. A system designed by an organization that does not reflect its culture will inevitably be rejected by its members. It is therefore important for the dispute resolution system to be connected to the organization's evolving culture (Raines, 2013, p.231); the system can help drive change, but it cannot itself be the change and the ombuds can act as an agent of change but cannot single-handedly enact change without the organization's buy-in from the top down. This should be considered when hiring ombuds officers as well as leaders within an organization where their values and the organization's public values must be congruent. For dispute resolution systems to positively influence an organization's culture, leaders and ombuds must manage problems fairly and efficiently (Raines, 2013, p.231).

The term “fair” is very subjective and depends on the lens through which it is viewed. Leaders who manage across cultures should understand the various perceptions and perspectives of their workforce. This also applies to Ombuds Officers who work in a multicultural environment where their approach to conflict resolution could be less impactful because of potential cultural barriers or differences between participants as well as the process. Educating Ombuds, managers, and employees within the organization about potential cultural differences builds trust amongst parties by laying the foundation of understanding and improved communication (Erbe, 2019, p.57).

Ombuds Source of Power

As highlighted, the position of the Ombuds does not carry formal authority. At most, it is officially an advisory position and relies heavily on voluntary participation from the workforce and support from organizational leaders. However, the lack of formal authority can also be leveraged as a benefit if approached appropriately. The lack of formal authority removes employees’ concerns about repercussions when working with the Ombuds Office, allowing them to be more open and honest without fear of punishment. This is also supported by the major ombuds tenants of confidentiality and independence, both of which are pillars of ethical ombuds principles (Ziegenfuss & O’Rourke, 2011, p.31-32, p.101; IOA website). Ombuds need to clarify to members of the organization that their role is different from other departments within the organization, such as Compliance or Human Resources, to emphasize the independent nature of their work (Erbe, 2019, p.100). One means to strengthen the independence of the office and to highlight the gravity Ombuds place on confidentiality is by physically placing the Ombuds office in a strategic location, allowing visitors to come and go with minimum risk of being identified or seen by others (Erbe, 2019, p.110). Providing this type of physical separation from the rest of the

organization, or its leaders helps enforce the understanding that the Ombuds office is different from other, more commonly known departs within an organization.

Organizational Ombuds derive their greatest power and protection from "walking the talk" (Erbe, 2019, p.100). This entails setting the example by not only abiding by the ombuds code of ethics but also by displaying appropriate and efficient use of ADR methods for members of the organization to learn from. It is not only important for Ombuds Officers to gain the trust of an organization's members, but just as importantly they must also develop credibility with top leadership. This lends weight to the information the Ombuds share with decision-makers to enact potential change, but it also allows the Ombuds to provide meaningful feedback to leadership about the leader's negative contributions to an organization (Erbe, 2019, p.102). Another source of power an Ombuds has is directly reporting to high levels of management within the organization. Directly communicating with top organizational leaders reduces the possibility of an Ombuds Officer facing a conflict-of-interest situation between supervisors and employees where the information provided by the Ombuds office gets filtered up the chain of command (Erbe, 2019, p.123).

IOA and Professional Networks of Ombuds

The Ombuds community is always growing and several professional networks can help both new and experienced ombuds officers gain a better understanding of best practices across the conflict resolution field. The largest and most prominent of the organizations is the International Ombudsman Association (IOA), whose standards are globally recognized as the guide rails of Ombuds work (p.98-99). These standards of practice cover many of the aspects required to be an effective ombud: Independence, Neutrality, Informality, and Confidentiality.

The IOA guides ombuds practitioners in many areas to help them prepare to meet positional expectations. The IOA is not a one-stop shop for practitioners to get all of the answers to the challenges facing organizational ombuds. (p.108). IOA's mission statement is "to advance the profession of organizational ombuds and ensure that practitioners can work to the highest professional standards", and IOA's vision is for every organization to have an ombuds office (IOA website). The member-led professional association caters to ombuds professionals from all types of organizations, including corporations and non-profit organizations, educational institutions, and government entities. The IOA is comprised of over 1,000 organizational ombuds, classical ombuds, and advocate ombuds practitioners, student affiliates, retired professionals, and distinguished emeritus members located in over 50 countries (IOA website). It was officially established in 2005 with the merging of the University and College Ombuds Association (UCOA) with The Ombudsman Association (TOA).

The United States Ombudsman Association (USOA) is the oldest ombudsman organization in North America, founded in 1977 to foster the development of public sector ombudsman offices (US Ombudsman Org). Its members are spread across local, state, and federal levels of government and "operates exclusively for educational, scientific and charitable purposes" (US Ombudsman Org). They offer specialty chapters focused on Children and Families, Public Safety, Education, both Federal and Local Government, as well as Healthcare (US Ombudsman Org). Other ombuds associations in North America include the Board of Certification for Organizational Ombudsman Practitioners (CO-OP), the Association for Conflict Resolution (ACR) Ombuds Section, and the Coalition of Federal Ombudsmen (COFO).

Theoretical Frameworks

Systems Theory

A system is a set of elements that are interconnected in a manner that results in an outcome (Meadows, 2008, p.12). Donella Meadows highlights in her 2008 book *Thinking in Systems* that a system consists of three separate entities: elements, interconnectivity between elements, and a function or purpose (p.12). In a system, something happens to achieve something else. Systems theory is a broad concept that is applied to everything from anatomy to zoology, within both the hard and soft sciences, and is used to help explain how something functions and why certain results are reached. General systems theory takes into consideration universal laws and principles that exist naturally in our world to create an understanding of inputs and outputs confined to reality (Bertalanffy, 1969, p.33).

Common examples of systems include our solar system, our cardiovascular system, and our political system. Each system is bound by a set of rules and regulations, whether they be natural or manmade, and consists of elements (planets, organs, people) interacting with other elements to serve a function or purpose, ranging from planets orbiting the sun to blood circulation to laws being written. Schellenberg introduces the concept of inputs in his definition of what a system is, stating that a system is "a unity of interacting parts, but with inputs from the surrounding environment" (1996, p.71). He also highlights the use of common computer terms such as inputs, outputs, and system configuration, and how the concepts apply to social sciences as well as computer science (Schellenberg, 1996, p.72).

As noted, a system can take on countless forms and shapes, but they are usually classified into three types of systems: open, closed, or isolated. Most systems in existence are open systems, meaning they are influenced by their surrounding environment (Johnson, 2007, p.14).

An example of such a system could be a classroom with a teacher and students; the teacher contracts a cold from a family member at home (outside of the school system) and must call out of work for a few days, thus influencing the classroom system. A closed system is mostly found within the confines of a laboratory where it is possible to control for most variables; however, there are a few exceptions. If a tribe of people lives on an island that is secluded from the rest of the world, they would be closed off from outside influences and thus be considered a closed social system. Isolated systems occur in a vacuum where every aspect of the system is controlled and is thus not relevant to this conversation.

When applied to a societal and cultural system, systems theory highlights the influence that social learning has on the environment in question. Open systems are dynamic in that they can change over time based on outside influences. One factor for change is the social learning of its elements (i.e., the people of which the social system is comprised); as people experience or learn from various experiences their perspective changes, thus altering their performance or interconnectivity within the social system (Ramsbotham et al, 2016, p.51). However, it is not as simple as a system's elements learning a new behavior because there is an underlying set of "default values" that are utilized by the elements of the system when confronted with an issue or problem to resolve (Ramsbotham, et al 2016, p.52). For real change in the system to occur, the system collectively needs to learn new behaviors, at an elemental level as well as at the default values level. This is referred to as second-order learning (Ramsbotham et al, 2016, p.52), which not only requires the ability to learn new behaviors but for the elements within the system to challenge existing assumptions and be willing to utilize the new behaviors that they have acquired.

It is also important to understand how systems interact with other systems. Looking at the example of a classroom system, if a teacher is sick and has to call in a substitute teacher, the classroom system is now influencing the substitute teacher system that the school has in place. If no substitutes are available, the school may have other teachers cover for the class, thus disrupting other systems of classes. Disruptions are not positive or negative by nature, they simply influence the relationship between systems. A system's ability to cope with change while maintaining its integrity is referred to as its elasticity; like a rubber band, the system can stretch and be contorted only so far before it breaks. Outside elements can influence a system's elasticity, just as outside temperatures can limit or expand the ability of a rubber band to stretch.

Systems can also build off each other, either by design or naturally (Meadows, 2008, p.15). There is a hierarchy system, and it is important to understand that the hierarchy is designed to serve the bottom, and lower systems, and not the top overarching ones (Meadow, 2008, p.178). In the education system, one teacher calling out sick will not disrupt the flow of the education system because there exist other systems to support that case. Individual classroom systems are parts of the school system. The school systems are part of the district's education system, and depending on the view one is interested in, systems can continue to grow in size. Smaller systems are more vulnerable to outside influences whereas larger systems are built to withstand a degree of outside interference. One teacher being sick will do very little to Florida's education system, but a pandemic that threatens the health of hundreds of teachers will surely influence the education system because it has decimated all of the smaller systems the larger one depends on.

Systems theory does not focus specifically on conflict analysis or resolution but instead takes a macro approach to understand what is happening and why it is happening, how things

interact, and come together, as well as how they clash and fall apart (Schellenberg, 1996, p.72). It is possible to identify solutions to conflicts or issues if one understands the conflicting elements. In this sense, it makes it just as important to understand the dysfunction in a system because it is then possible to create and implement approaches to mitigate or limit what is not working within a system and instead focus on making the system produce the desired output.

In addition to inputs and outputs, feedback loops of varying types help enforce and propagate behavior within a system or a hierarchical system structure (Meadow, 2008, p.26). For the school system, inputs could include the teacher, students, books, and other learning materials. Outputs would be the learning that was being achieved and graduating students to the next level. Feedback loops would be tests and quizzes where teachers guide students as to what they have done wrong or parent-teacher conferences where parents can highlight what a student likes about a given class. That feedback will help influence the system to produce the designed outcome.

Feedback loops are both internal and external to the system. As external pressures mount, they directly influence the system for it to survive, forcing its adaption to its surroundings while utilizing reorganizing internally to maintain or produce the desired outcome. Ashby's Law of Requisite Variety notes that a system's internal complexity needs to match or exceed its external complexity to maintain viability (Ashby, 1958). Based on Ashby's law, researchers should expect to see similar human and organizational behaviors based on similar external stimuli and complexities. Although no open systems are the same, and a degree of creativity and individualism within the systems will result in varying results, from a macro-level researchers would still be able to identify emerging patterns and conduct predictive analysis based on the aggregation of information and cases.

Change Theory

Change theory is used to explain and model how organizations can purposefully conduct any form of transition from old behaviors to new behaviors in a lasting and meaningful manner. The theory consists of many different frameworks, models, and compilations of ideas that focus not on a specific single initiative, but on a broader and holistic view of approaching change from both a systemic and process-based perspective as well as a people-focused perspective (Reinholz & Andrews, 2019). Managers and leaders can use the models derived from Change theory to better understand and approach underlying assumptions surrounding change efforts within their organizations, identify potential pitfalls and resistance points associated with introducing change to their members, and recognize necessary steps and actions required to enact permanent change.

Kurt Lewin, a German-born American psychologist, is considered a pioneer and one of the most prominent theorists within the field of social psychology (Haggbloom et al, 2002). His research on group dynamics and organizational development is still widely accepted and applied to modern-day research and understanding of action research. He developed what is commonly referred to as Force-field analysis, which is a framework that identifies situational influences that drive or block change from occurring. Driving forces represent new behaviors that support change whereas restricting forces represent the "old way" of doing things based largely on accepted norms embedded in an organization. As driving and restricting forces push and pull an organization to change, a quasi-stationary equilibrium is established representing the current state of the organization. Change occurs when driving forces exceed restricting forces, shifting the equilibrium to reflect the changes as new norms within an organization; the forces that drive change then shift to become restricting forces supporting the permanence of the new behavior.

This is a continuous phenomenon within organizations as driving and restricting forces are ever present, emphasizing the quasi-stationary nature of the organization's equilibrium.

Force-field analysis explains largely why change occurs, but Lewin further advanced the understanding of Change Theory by developing a three-stage model exploring the course of change. In what can be referred to as the Freeze process, Lewin outlines three steps needed for change to occur and eventually become embedded within the norms of an organization: unfreezing, change, and refreezing. When the driving forces of change outweigh the restricting forces, change will occur. The first step in the process is for an organization to unfreeze its current behavior. Although change frequently occurs naturally in people's lives, organizational change can often be met with resistance by its members. This is due to members experiencing survival anxiety, learning anxiety, or being comfortable with the status quo. To unfreeze behaviors that are targeted for change, leaders of an organization must create an awareness of the need for transformation and communicate the negative ramifications that maintaining the status quo has on the organization. Communication is especially important in the nascent stage of change and messaging should clearly define what is changing, why it is changing, and how the change will help both the organization and its members. It is important in the unfreezing stage that members of the organization experience psychological safety associated with the targeted change because that experience drives members' motivation to learn and accept the new behaviors.

The second stage, outlined by Lewin, is where change occurs, and change becomes real. This stage is largely comprised of imitation and scanning insights. Imitation refers to either positive or defensive identification with a role model, meaning desired behaviors are showcased and members are expected to adopt the targeted behaviors. Scanning insights is trial-and-error

learning, where members continually attempt to mimic the new behaviors and learn what works and what does not in their approach to reach the desired goal. Most people struggle with their new reality in this stage as they learn new behaviors and processes, but the more prepared members of the organization are to implement change, the easier the transition is. An organization can prepare its members through educational opportunities, consistent communication in not only the first stage but also during the change stage through feedback and positive reinforcement, and supporting the members' needs as they execute the transformation. An organization will go through a learning curve in the change stage, and it requires constant communication and messaging from the change agents regarding how this undertaking will benefit the organization and its members.

The final stage outlined by Lewin is refreezing, where the change is solidified and embedded within the norms and culture of the organization. The new behaviors need to be congruent with the culture and values of the organization or the desired change outcome will eventually be rejected by the system in which it is being implemented and change agents will find themselves thrust back to the first stage. It is important that leaders and change advocates continually engage with the organization's members to maintain the transition to the new accepted practices and way of thinking; again, this can be emphasized through positive reinforcement. This stage in particular has been criticized by some as unnecessary because today's organizations are in a consistent state of change and should not expend resources solidifying a process that will inevitably be changed again.

Many modern and recognized change models have been derived from the concepts outlined by Lewin. One of the more commonly utilized models is John P. Kotter's 8-step process for leading change (Kotter, 1995). First published in Harvard Business Review in 1995, the eight

steps outlined by Kotter reflect the three stages of change identified by Lewin. The process can be broken into three distinct phases that, while not directly mirroring Lewin, each have its own goals and attributes.

Figure 3

Kotter's 8-Step Process for Leading Change

Phase 1 Creating Climate & Understanding	Establish sense of urgency	Crisis/Opportunity, Status Quo unsustainable
	Form powerful coalition	Shared commitment, influential members
	Create vision	Create a vision and develop strategies
Phase 2 Engage & Enable Members	Communicate vision	Communicate and Exemplify behaviors
	Empower others to implement the vision	Restructure and support growth, incentivize
	Plan for & create short-term wins	Define milestones, celebrate achievements
Phase 3 Implement & Sustain Change	Consolidate improvements & produce more desired change	Leverage credibility, attract support
	Institutionalize new approach	Connection new behaviors with successes

Note: From Kotter, J. (1995) *Leading change: Why transformation efforts fail.*

In the first phase, the organization must create a climate conducive to change by broadening the understanding its members have of the current climate and future perspectives. Creating a sense of urgency is done by highlighting pitfalls of the status quo and/or opportunities and benefits brought on by change. Kotter indicates that it takes 75% or more organizational leaders and managers to believe that the status quo is more dangerous to the organization than the unknown brought on by potential change (Kotter, 1995). After urgency is created, change advocates should assemble a cohesive group of people who have the influence to drive the desired change (acting as agents of change); establishing a group to champion change while

lacking any influence to enact change will result in futility. Once a group of change agents is formed, they create a vision for the change and develop strategies for meeting the desired transition goals. The vision must be clear, concise, and not overly complicated to create confusion or misunderstanding.

The second phase includes steps 4 through 6 and focuses on engaging and enabling members of the organization to build buy-in and support driving change. The group needs to begin communicating their established vision and strategy within the organization by utilizing an array of means, not only through traditional communication methods but also through demonstrating and modeling desired behaviors, which is especially important for executives and leaders of the organization to do. Once the vision and strategies have been communicated, the group must exercise its influence in changing structures to best support the stated vision and allow organizational members to act as change agents as well; encouraging members to act as change agents can also be done through incentives. The final step of Phase 2 is for leaders to identify and define short-term wins. These include milestones and achievements that can be recognized and celebrated to continue building enthusiasm and moments in reaching the change goal. Kotter defines the short-term as 12-24 months, which has been criticized as too long because within that time the landscape and potential driving forces (the term coined by Lewin) will have evolved and a new vision and endgame could be desired.

The third and final phase of Kotter's 8-step process focuses on the implementation and sustainment of change within the organization, parallel to the tail end of Lewin's Change phase and applying the concept of refreezing. Implementing change will produce systemic feedback (what is working, what is not) and change implementation requires flexibility within the organization. Change agents can leverage their credibility from their short-term wins and

achievements to advocate and establish the new behaviors as the new normal. The final step is the institutionalization of the change into the culture of the organization. Leaders must articulate the connection between the new initiatives or behaviors and the successes the organization enjoys. Change is fully implemented once it becomes the way the organization conducts itself naturally. Critics of Kotter's 8-step process argue that not only is the timeline unrealistic, but it is an overall rigid approach that does not leave room for adaptation to varying circumstances or organizational capabilities. They argue that an organization should be able to take several steps congruently and that not all steps are relevant to all organizations. The 8-step process does not address dealing with the difficulties surrounding change either.

A third and final model being explored that delves into Change theory is the Cycle of Change developed by Prochaska and DiClemente in 1983. The authors break down change into a cyclical occurrence where trial and error learning drives an organization to solidify change within an organization. They highlight the importance of learning from previous iterations because they note that only 20% of the change in an organization reaches the point of refreezing and that 80% of change initiatives eventually revert to pre-change initiative behaviors (Prochaska & DiClemente, 1983). However, the continuity of learning from previous mistakes and mistrials helps in future attempts to enact meaningful and long-term change in an organization.

The cycle consists of six stages, the first of which is Precontemplation. At this stage, there is no intention or requirement for change. This would be equivalent to the quasi-stable equilibrium that Lewin identified. As driving forces grow in strength, they push an organization to the second stage, Contemplation. Here the organization is aware of an issue or the driving forces but has not committed to meaningful action. Preparation is the third stage and it is reached when an organization is intent on taking action to enact change. The first three stages neatly fall

within Lewin's Unfreeze categorization. The fourth stage is the organization's call to Action, where it actively attempts to modify its behavior to meet the desired end state. It does not spell out how to enact change like Kotter's 8-step model, only that the organization is taking action. This is equivalent to Lewin's Change stage. The fifth phase of Prochaska and DiClemente's cycle is that of Maintenance. Here is where the organization attempts to establish structures and mechanisms to sustain the desired change they have achieved, replacing old habits with new ones permanently. The final stage is that of Relapse, where the organization is likely to revert to its old habits if the new ones aren't solidified. The final phases of the cycle can be paralleled to Lewin's Unfreeze stage. If and when the desired outcome is maintained permanently then the organization jumps directly from Maintenance to Precontemplation, where it started.

There are many other models based on Change Theory and the three addressed focus mainly on the process of change. Some of the more prominent Change Theory models focused on people include the ADKAR Model of Change, Nudge Theory, Satir Change Model, Bridges' Transition Model, the Change Curve, and Maurer's 3 Levels of Resistance. It is worth noting that similarities exist across several of the models and there is expected and unavoidable overlap. One example is in both the Change Curve, which graphs the expected motivation and performance of an organization over time as it transverses a cycle of change, and the Satir Change Model which similarly charts the expectation of performance over time when an organization experiences change, that there is going to be a period of Chaos (Satir) or Frustration (Change Curve) where performance drops compared to pre-change initiative levels. This is an expected drop and is akin to the concept of something getting worse before it gets better. Both models also have a degree of resistance or denial in the early stages of the change initiative. Mauer's 3 Levels of Resistance further explores the mentality members of an organization

usually have as they transition from old behaviors to new ones, specifically outlining what one would expect from the denial/resistance phases of Satir and the Change Curve. Mauer suggests people resist change as a means of protecting themselves from harm or the unknown. He claims the initial reaction to change is the mindset of "I don't get it" because people do not have all of the facts needed to understand the reasons for change. Communication and education help shift the members' focus to the next level, which is "I don't like it". This is their natural response to taking on new ideas and facing unknown circumstances outside of their old comfort zones. After understanding the benefits of the change and coming to terms with what the new normal may be, the final level of resistance an organization faces when undertaking change is "I don't like you" where the resistance to the change has dissipated and has been replaced with distrust in leadership's ability to deliver the expected change.

Mauer's 3 Levels of Resistance explores the emotions people experience during a period of change. John Kotter, though his 8-step model was process-focused, touched on the balance between process and people. He surmised that "change is not only about what you think, it's also about what you feel" (Maurer, 1996). When applying Change theory to any organization's initiatives, it is important to balance the framing between the structure of the organization while simultaneously taking into consideration the members of the organization. As an Ombuds Officer saddled with the responsibility of being a Change Agent for their organization, they must be aware of the many aspects of change, the stages an organization should expect to cross, and the emotions people will likely experience and express. Being a successful Ombuds entails understanding and utilizing the concepts of Change Theory to support not only the members of the organization but the organization as a symbiotic whole.

Organizational Culture Theory

One of the ultimate goals of an Ombuds Officer as an agent of change is to positively influence the organization's culture. This chapter has already explored the definition of culture and the importance of understanding culture and its effects on a group. Organizational Culture Theory is important to explore because as Cloke and Goldsmith noted, "Many organizations have cultures that foster and reward difficult behaviors and aggravate conflict" (2011, p.226). They go on to write that changing an organization's culture is required to change difficult behaviors within an organization (2011, p.226).

Organizational culture operates identically to societal cultures, where organizations openly and subconsciously convey messages of acceptable behavior (Dana, 2001, p.150). The message an organization is sending is very specific: conform or risk not being accepted.

Conflict often arises in an organization when people do not conform to the established culture. Understanding the current culture is the first step in redeveloping an organization's culture because it provides insight into why the system is producing its outputs, while also highlighting what internal mechanisms require change to produce the desired results. Studying an organization's culture will help identify systems, subcultures, and the context that drives organizational conflict (Cloke p.124). At an individual level, people can identify the aspects of their organization's culture simply by asking themselves *what behaviors are required for them to be accepted* or *what values do they keep to themselves for fear of disapproval from the group* (Dana, 2001, p.150).

A constructive culture serves three crucial functions within an organization: providing its members with an identity, generating support within the organization for its mission, and establishing and enforcing behavioral standards and norms (Greenberg, 2010, p.342). Providing

identity to the organization increases its members' association and connection with its mission, creating a desire for people to take ownership of their actions and contributions to the greater community, and people then become personally invested in the success of the group. Increasing individual members' commitments to the overall mission helps people see beyond their self-interests and provides a direction for the group as a whole.

Developing and changing an organization's culture is not easy and should not be expected to occur quickly. Some tools and approaches support the development of positive cultural changes, starting with encouraging open discussion about the current culture and where the organization would like to see the culture (Cloke and Goldsmith, 2011, p.228). Fostering an environment where it is safe to discuss the norms and values of the organization can push individuals to rethink their actions and contributions to the group and collectively the organization can work towards a common cultural goal. An effective way of defining what the organizational culture should be is to ask the members of the organization what standards, values, or norms they feel are important and how they can be incorporated into the organization (Cloke and Goldsmith, 2011, pp.228-229).

Greenberg identifies several key mechanisms in which culture is transmitted to members within an organization and knowing how culture is transmitted indicates to the organization how it can approach changing its culture. The mechanisms Greenberg identifies are symbols, stories, jargon, ceremonies, and statements of principle (Greenberg, 2010, p.345). Many of these align with what Schein described in the three layers of culture: artifacts, espoused beliefs and values, and basic underlying assumptions (2017, p.18).

An organization's culture is not only a reflection of its internal norms and accepted behaviors, but also because of outside influences beyond the control of the organization. As the

external landscape around an organization evolves, such as changes in government policies, market conditions, and advances in technology, the organization also evolves, finding ways of adapting or coping with the change (Greenberg, 2010, p.349).

To create an organization with a high level of conflict resilience and intelligence, the goal for leaders and agents of change within an organization is establishing or shifting to a culture of paradoxical problem-solving. This change requires a shift not only in how we perceive issues but how we approach and respond to them (Cloke 182). In his 1960 publication, *The Human Side of Enterprise*, Douglas McGregor presented two opposing theories of human behavior, highlighting fundamental differences in mindsets between what is considered a "Traditional" approach to organizational conflict versus a "Potential" perspective. The traditional mindset, or Theory X, views issues from a pessimistic, negative lens where one expects the worst in people; however, in Theory Y viewers consider issues from a constructive lens where they look for the best in people (McGregor, 1960). In Theory X, managers view people as lazy, complacent, in need of direction, and unmotivated; However, in Theory Y people are viewed as highly responsive, hardworking, and motivated to succeed (Greenberg, 2010, pp.6-7). Changing an organization's culture to the latter makes problem-solving more constructive, accepting of diverse ideas, and focusing on what could be as opposed to what cannot.

Chapter 3: Methodology

The research of Ombuds as agents of change was conducted using an explorative qualitative study approach that relied on interviews conducted over 6 months. The data and conclusions presented in Chapter 5 are supported by published and openly available opinions, experiences, and suggestions made by ADR experts and ombuds officers (not limited to the bounds of academic ombuds). Qualitative methodology allows researchers to capture the stories and perceptions of the issues at the center of a conflict, ones based on emotions and feelings, providing more value in some cases to interested parties.

The study of effective ombuds is centered on the human experience. It is based on the needs, fears, concerns, and identity of an organization's employees and the culture they have created. Qualitative studies are broader and more flexible than their empirical alternative, offering a wider range of options that can better document the driving factors of ombuds' success. One of the criticisms of qualitative research is that, with few exceptions, it is not conducive to theory development (Lloyd-Jones, 2003); however, the research for this dissertation did not attempt to develop new theories and instead applied existing theories to the data collected to gain an understanding of transforming conflict trend analysis to resolution without the leverage of formal authority.

Corbin and Strauss state that qualitative research is more appropriate for studying experiences, relationships, the formation of meanings, and is a more holistic approach compared to quantitative research methods (2015, p.5). Qualitative research also provides a means for the voices of the research subjects to carry the message, which can be very powerful depending on the study (Cooper & Finley, 2014, p.3). Qualitative data includes more content-rich and contextual information than quantitative data, which is important for understanding the human element of the topic (Ramsbotham et al, 2016, p.153). The process of collecting and analyzing

data is also not as linear as quantitative methods. Just as dynamic as humans are, qualitative research methods require flexibility.

There are numerous purposes for conducting qualitative research, including description, exploration, explanation, and evaluation (Cooper & Rice, 2014, p.33). Each is self-explanatory and is effective depending on the goal of the research. For this study, an explorative research study to understand ombuds' successful approaches to enacting change within their organizations was utilized. Explorative studies focus on specific accounts of the matter at hand and are used to present basic findings while creating the foundation for future research and theorization (Muvingi & Duckworth, 2014). Additionally, the expectation of this research as an explorative study was focused on conflict systems transformation by providing what Willis refers to as a "rich, detailed description of the case" that is void of utilizing an initial or eventually developing a theory based on the findings of the study (Willis, 2007, p.243). Although it is an explorative study, it is based on an integrative approach to research in that the goal is understanding a particular system within a specific context.

There are several methodologies to choose from in qualitative studies, including primary or secondary qualitative research design, program evaluation, meta-study, or a hybrid of methodologies encompassed in mixed methodology design (Cooper & Rice, 2014, p.38). Primary qualitative research was utilized for this research; the research involves gathering original data, as opposed to secondary qualitative research design which takes pre-existing data and a researcher applies their research questions and methods to the pre-existing dataset. There are also many methods of qualitative research; Schellenberg highlights six common methods observational, survey, experimental, historic, archival, and content analysis (1996, pp.28-29).

As described, the research conducted in this study followed an ontological system mapping process, as outlined by Henderson and DePorres (2014), focused on University Ombuds. The process has been proven successful in identifying the social system's ontological footprints and was applied to understand and identify University Ombuds as change agents within the academic social system. This approach consists of six steps: identifying suitable subjects within the specific network, conducting protocol interviews, transcribing the interviews, conducting themed analysis (coding) of individual data points, conducting secondary analysis across the data set, and identifying a model or themes focused on answering the research question.

Participants

The participants of this study were ombuds professionals working for either public or private universities in the United States. Purposive sampling with a snowball approach to expand the number of participants was originally expected to be utilized to conduct between 8 and 15 interviews. There is no established optimum number of interviews, however previous studies of this nature have been conducted with this range of research participants (Wakefield, 2012; Henderson & Boje, 2016). Although fewer interviews are acceptable for qualitative studies, due to the variety of potential approaches to conflict resolution as well as the diversity of ombuds offices, a larger number of participants likely yields data to narrow the scope of proven approaches taken by ombuds officers. Based on family resemblance analysis, more interviews and more data also help highlight the common traits of the successful ombuds approaches as well as the systems to which they are applied.

The data collection phase concluded with 10 participants from across the country. The snowball approach was not successful in finding participants as the first study participants could

not recommend peers to include in the study; it became evident early in the research phase that there is a lack of a cohesive university ombuds community and that most ombuds programs are very individualized and not associated with a greater academic ombuds network. Schools were therefore selected at random in waves of 10 and emails were sent individually to the schools' ombuds alias or identified Ombuds Officer, whatever information was provided on the university websites. On average, the participation rate was approximately 30% and, in the end, almost 40 schools were contacted. Interviews were conducted virtually on Zoom between May and October 2023 with each interview lasting no more than one hour and no follow-on interviews were needed. Interviews were recorded and later transcribed to enable data analysis. Most questions were open-ended and asked the participant to share their personal experiences or thoughts, as opposed to asking for theoretical answers about fictional scenarios. Participants were very willing to share information while maintaining the anonymity of the subjects of their stories and experiences.

There were no formal barriers to accessing the population. However, communicating with the targeted population was based on the willingness of ombuds officers to participate. Interviews were conducted with willing members of the profession to allow them to share their lived experiences with conflict resolution at American universities. This sampling of the population should be considered purposive, which is defined as population sampling based on the inclusion of the participants in the targeted population (Salkind, 2010, p.1294). Interviews are sometimes considered the most challenging data to collect because they require a degree of trust and openness on the participants' part. Being upfront with the participants from the beginning about the intentions of the research helped alleviate a level of concern and possibly open opportunities to speak with people. The interviews were semi-structured in that there was a

list of questions the researcher pulled from, but the conversation had the freedom and flexibility to go where the participant wanted to take it. For a list of interview questions, see Appendix A.

Addressing the main research question, *how do ombuds at universities serve as change agents*, was challenging because different universities have different internal systems in place; additionally, the success of an ombuds officer is reliant on personal relationships developed over time within the organization and are thus unique. Instead of identifying the approach for change based on set characteristics or criteria, coding and a family resemblance trend analysis were utilized to identify the characteristics of successful approaches to enact change within the university systems.

Ombuds Officers are often charged with supporting the entire social structure of an organization, company, university, or group. Most traditionally structured organizations, such as universities, have a Board or some form of a governing body, followed by the executive level, where each executive has divisions that they are responsible for, and each division has organizations within it. One purpose for this common breakdown is to make the organization more manageable; it is more challenging for a supervisor to manage 99 individuals than it is for a supervisor to manage 9 individuals, who in turn are expected to each manage 9 other individuals. The various levels within an organization will inevitably face different issues, but they also share many commonalities and fundamental managing principles. For this research, sub-organizations or population categories were identified to serve as the different levels of the organization: students (graduate and undergraduate), faculty, staff, and leadership.

Additionally for this research, interview questions posed to university ombuds officers were analyzed and coded to determine whether ombuds approach different segments of the organization differently or if they are managed similarly across the university regardless of level.

Does an ombuds officer approach supporting the dean of a college in the same manner they support a student? Do ombuds provide similar conflict management training to various levels of an organization?

Family Resemblance, first conceptualized by Ludwig Wittgenstein in 1978, refers to the fact that a family (or organization) may be characterized by various shared traits or qualities, but that no member will have all of the characteristics (Willis, 2007, p.185). Resemblances are shared characteristics that identify a system, but they do not have to be shared by every single member of the population. Rather, a system can be defined or identified by a "sufficient amount of necessary features." (Wittgenstein, 1978). The shared similarities, or shared differences, can sometimes create a complex network of traits that range from general to very detailed qualities (Wittgenstein, 1978). The concept of resemblance was further been developed by Hanne Anderson in 2000, where he noted that systems "must be understood as progressively developed through history" (Anderson, 2000). This expansion of understanding resemblance means that just as systems evolve, so do the shared traits and characteristics of the system. It is important to highlight that systems, much like cultures, evolve over time and that the proposed study is a snapshot of the current climate and successful approaches to conflict resolution change taken by ombuds officers.

Criticism of Wittgenstein has focused on the ambiguity and potentially extending ideas infinitely, leading to meaningless similarities (Willis, 2007, p.187). However, these arguments are similar to what people question about qualitative research and can be given the same regard.

The data was analyzed using first and second-tier coding with the expectation of developing inductive themes, meaning there were no pre-established themes by which this data was originally planned on being "binned". The research questions were initially based on an

understanding of the position from the investigation conducted for Chapter 2 Literature Review. This approach was applied to each data point, providing a uniform analysis methodology for relevant analytic comparison of the information. Additionally, magnitude coding was applied to present the frequency and gravity of the concepts to identify appropriate codes (Sage Publications, 2020, pp.71-72). In the context of this research, codes were developed based on the frequency of familial resemblance traits of responses given by the participants and were not deductive in scope and nature.

Coding and Data Review

While the data was being collected, analysis was simultaneously conducted. The analysis consists of a variety of approaches; one popular method of data analysis in qualitative research is coding, which was applied to the qualitative data collected through interviews. Coding is a researcher-generated summarization of data points using plain language to organize information into groups or chunks for broader analysis. Saldana highlights that coding can consist of two cycles, one for initial thoughts on specific texts, phrases, or words and a second set to perform more in the broad analysis (2016, p.4). Transcribing interviews allowed for conducting first and second-cycle coding to identify recurring themes in the data. Themes can relate to feelings, reactions, and patterns to name a few. First-cycle coding could focus on the smaller details, the verbiage, wording, emotions, or commonalities. Second-cycle coding would consider all of the first-cycle coding and develop overarching themes based on what was noted. If in the first cycle the researcher coded Frustration, Contempt, Aggravation, and Disgust, then perhaps in the second cycle the researcher codes all of those into an overarching Anger theme.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical and other concerns were also considered. The rigor of a study refers to the strength of the research design, including how suitable the methodology, methods, data collection, and analysis were related to answering the research questions (Cypress, 2017). Trustworthiness is another aspect of qualitative research that needs to be considered along with rigor. Is the researcher being truthful in their research and is the research trustworthy? As mentioned previously, associating the research design with published literature strengthens the trustworthiness of the research because it gives it points of relatability and comparison. A component of trust is also ethical consideration. Was the study conducted ethically, did participants voluntarily consent to share their opinions and stories without being coerced or deceived? Consent should be confirmed before, during, and after the data has been collected because, throughout the research process, a participant could change their mind or choose to withhold certain aspects of what they are saying or who they are (Miller & Bell, 2012, p.61). Researchers must always take into consideration why someone may volunteer to participate when others opt not to, and document as much of that information as possible (Miller & Bell, 2012, p.63). Above all else, research subjects have the right to withdraw any participation and researchers must respect that right. Ombuds' work is characterized as impartial, neutral, and at times anonymous due to the sensitivity of the conflict. Participants of this study shared as much detail as they liked about themselves, but due to anonymity concerns names have been omitted entirely from the data presentation in this paper as that information is neither relevant to the study nor would it be ethical in any way to compromise the trust or safety of those that have received ombuds support.

Each source of data was independently collected and studied before being compiled together to provide the most holistic understanding of the research subject, specifically ombuds officers as agents of change. Interviews were semi-structured, conducted over ZOOM, recorded, and transcribed with approval from the participants beforehand. The transcript and subsequent notes were analyzed using first- and second-degree coding as outlined by Saldana, where systemic themes and conditions were identified. The interview questions focused on the types and conditions of systems creating conflict and change approaches utilized by ombuds within the university setting.

Conducting qualitative research can be very rewarding due to the rich information and personal feelings shared by participants. It provides a measure of accounting for the human aspect of research topics, where feelings and experiences provide more valuable insight than traditional empirical data. A study of how ombuds in academia effectively transform observation into action can spur future academic studies focused on other industry ombuds while also proliferating effective and proven behaviors within the ombuds community to build a stronger ADR community.

Chapter 4: Findings

As outlined in the previous chapter, data was gathered by interviewing current Ombuds Officers working in universities across the US to identify trends and themes in their approach to their positions. Additionally, the research was conducted to identify how University Ombuds approach groups similarly or differently. This chapter presents the results of said interviews, including demographic information about the schools and ombuds programs at the universities, trends, and themes that emerged from data analysis. This chapter also presents both data collected in the interviews conducted with the ombuds and analysis of the data to answer the stated research questions from Chapter 1. Multi-order and magnitude coding was applied to the data to identify themes focused on answering the research questions.

As previously mentioned, due to anonymity concerns by several participants and the focus being on practical approaches to ombuds and not an indictment to the schools themselves, the names of the participants and the schools are being obfuscated. They do not provide academic value to the study; however, demographic information is presented to help categorize schools by size, public vs private, and other factors for potential grouping and trend analysis.

Data Presentation

Theme 1: Participant Demographics and Road to University Ombuds

This theme presents information on the following critical aspects of the University Ombuds and the participants of this study:

- Demographics of participants and the university they serve
- Ombuds History at the University

- Educational background and previous experience before becoming a University Ombuds

Although several factors limited potential participants in this research undertaking, a wide net was cast to collect broad opinions from the University Ombuds community. The following broad criteria were used to limit research participants:

- Currently serves as a University Ombuds
- Minimum 1-year experience in the position
- The university is located in the United States
- University is a 4-year institute
- Ombuds was their primary job responsibility and not a collateral duty

10 University Ombuds participated in this study from across the country. The following is a demographic breakdown of the schools whose ombuds participated in the research:

Table 1

University Demographics: Public/Private and Size

School ID	**Public/Private**	**School Size**
School 1	Public	17,000+
School 2	Private	6,000+
School 3	Public	12.000
School 4	Public	50,000
School 5	Public	32,000+
School 6	Public	27.000+
School 7	Private	20,000+
School 8	Public	30,000
School 9	Public	30000+
School 10	Public	48000+

Different sources define and categorize school sizes differently. This information is being presented to provide a perspective of the diverse schools whose ombudspersons participated in the study and possibly illuminate correlations between school size and trends in ombuds approaches and behaviors. For the sake of this study, categorizing school size is based on the total enrolled students at the university. As defined by the Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education, a school with a full-time student population of less than 999 is considered Very Small. A school with a full-time student population between 1,000 and 2,999 is considered Small. A school with a full-time student population between 3,000 and 9,999 is considered Medium. Finally, a school with a population greater than 10,000 is considered Large (Carnegie Classifications, n.d.).

Table 2 is a demographic breakdown of the ombuds organization at the participating University:

Table 2

University Demographics: Ombuds History and Full-Time Employment

School ID	History of Ombuds at the University	Full-Time Job
School 1	Rich History	Y
School 2	Budding and Bumpy	Y
School 3	Budding and Bumpy	N
School 4	Rich history	Y
School 5	Budding and Bumpy	Y
School 6	Budding and Bumpy	Y
School 7	Budding and Bumpy	Y
School 8	Budding and Bumpy	Y
School 9	Budding and Bumpy	Y
School 10	Rich History	Y

A Rich History of Ombuds at a University entails the office being firmly established and embedded within the university's social system. The category Budding and Bumpy is used to describe newer and developing programs, either recently established or re-organized by the university to update or realign the Ombuds office with the needs of the institute. The use of the term Bumpy is not meant to be derogatory or negative and is simply describing the atmosphere around the organization, based on the participants' description of the situation they found themselves in.

School 3 was a notable outlier in that it was the only school that did not have at least one full-time ombudsperson. That school has two employees serving in the Ombuds positions, neither of them are full-time positions however they are full-time employees whose primary responsibilities are Ombuds. They have additional responsibilities within the University that take less than 50% of their time and the Ombuds Office is manned most days of the week by either of the Ombuds Officers. Because more than half of their time is dedicated to ombuds, **School 3** was included in the study. It is common, especially among smaller schools and for ombuds programs that have a significantly reduced operating budget, that the ombudsperson is dual-hatted and that the ombuds role and responsibilities are considered collateral duty (Katz, Sosa, & Kovack, 2018). These ombuds offices usually service substantially fewer visitors on an annual basis than ombuds programs that have full-time staff.

The following is a demographic breakdown of the ombuds officers who participated in the study, focusing on their background and experiences before assuming the role of University Ombuds as well as their current time in the position and other duties they are expected to assume as Ombuds:

Table 3

Research Participants' Background and Collateral Duties

School ID	Previous Ombuds Experience	Educational Background	Ombuds Time on the Job	Other Duties
School 1	No	Law & Justice	1-3 Years	Committee Assignments
School 2	No	Law & Justice	1-3 Years	No
School 3	No	Sociology	1-3 Years	Title IX
School 4	Limited	Education	10+ Years	No
School 5	Yes	Sociology	7-9 Years	Committee Assignments
School 6	No	Public Safety	1-3 Years	No
School 7	No	Healing & Psychology	4-6 Years	No
School 8	Yes	Other	4-6 Years	No
School 9	No	Sociology	1-3 Years	No
School 10	Yes	Healing & Psychology	10+ Years	No

There are several points of clarification and major takeaways from the analysis of the demographic data. First and foremost, it is important to remember that all information provided was self-identified by the research participant through open-ended questioning. Multiple-choice options were not provided and the answers were later categorized by the author of the research paper. The only exception to this is the data about the University itself, which was derived from their respective websites. It is also worth noting that each School ID is unique and represents a separate University; no participants were interviewed who worked for the same academic institute. Educational Background has intentionally been obfuscated because of anonymity concerns numerous participants shared during their interviews.

One concern most of the participants shared was related to Title IX reporting and the school's expectations of Ombuds as reporters versus what the ombudsperson thinks their responsibilities should be. According to the U.S. Department of Education (DoE), Title IX "prohibits discrimination based on sex in education programs and activities" (Office for Civil Rights, 2021). Any school from elementary through university, either public or private, which receives any federal funds must comply with Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972. The DoE identifies discrimination based on sex as actions including sexual harassment, violence, assault, battery, or coercion (Office for Civil Rights, 2021). Most of the participants in this research shared that their leadership expected them to report any incidents that would fall under Title IX; however, the entirety of the Ombuds community seems to continually push against this idea as it would violate their standard of confidentially and could deter potential patrons from talking to the ombuds office. Only one of the ombuds study participants is required to report Title IX incidents, though the majority of participants indicated that their office either used to report or that they had successfully advocated against assuming the responsibility upon being hired into the position. Additionally, two participants indicated that they are required to sit on various university committees but both ombuds do so in a non-voting capacity because of concerns they have with potential neutrality perceptions. The ombuds from **School 1** and **School 5** specifically stated:

> I also serve on a working group because one of the policies that I immediately commented on was our lived chosen name policy and gender recognition for some revision and some real gaps between the promises of the policy and the deliverables vis a vis some of our information systems on campus. … I need to be

> ex-officio and non-voting to serve because ex-officio means non-voting. (*School 1)*
>
> We can be strategic about serving on certain kinds of committees like the climate survey, you know, things like that, you know, employee engagement surveys, student engagement surveys, which are climate surveys. (*School 5)*

It is worth noting that the two largest schools in this study both have a rich history of ombuds as well as the longest-serving ombudsperson. Both also had at least limited ombuds experience before assuming their position at their respective universities. This is likely no coincidence and is instead a result of a robust ombuds effort fostered over time at the school, where ombuds are given priority and are recognized as a vital component of university services. The three largest schools included in this study also have the most robust ombuds programs; several ombuds officers at the smaller schools indicated a need to grow their offices but a lack of resources to be able to do so.

Likely, the historic value provided by the ombuds efforts to their universities has led to the growth and stability of the ombuds offices, decreasing ombuds turnover at the schools and lessening the need for ombuds to advocate to university leadership to remain relevant and appropriately resourced.

The demographic information also indicates that there is no single path to becoming a University Ombudsperson. This is clear by the diverse educational backgrounds the research participants have as well as the lack of previous ombuds experience the research participants had before assuming their current roles. When asked about identifiable attributes to be successful as a University Ombuds, one participant stated the need for broad life experiences and that the

position would be hard to fill with a college graduate with little to no experience outside of their academic career. They stated:

> Is ombuds a field that makes sense for young professionals to get into as they complete a master's degree or a Ph.D., as you're doing in conflict resolution? And then they go to work, you know, at an institution, and then they serve for the full extent of their career as an ombuds. Is that the best way to do it, or is it actually better for someone to come in mid-career, having worked in areas of a variety of leadership research, you know, kind of doing the work and then shifting into this space, learning the conflict resolution piece as in some ways a second or middle career and then shifting to that space? I have worked with folks on both sides of that. My tendency or hunch would be that it's the latter, that you need that breadth of experience to be able to actually make conflict resolution tools fully useful. But I can see both sides of it. But I think it's an interesting argument for our field because as we professionalize it, more people are getting into it at a younger age and it's not like we have a forced kind of push out where you say, okay, well, you do ombuds for five years and then go out into the field and work for ten years and then come back. Um, which I think actually would be kind of ideal. We can't do it that way. So, then it becomes this interesting question of what's the best path towards creating the sort of knowledge and maturity and thoughtfulness that I think people really need from an ombuds. *(School 1)*

Additionally, a second participant also noted (related to their experience in life before taking the position), saying:

> I had a background in higher ed. I knew how things worked. I dealt with conflict. You can't do it at 24 or 25 years old after getting a master's degree. Maybe you can. The right person can, but it wouldn't have been me at that age. At that age, you know, I didn't know which way was up. (*School 6)*

This chapter will further develop the topic of success as a university ombuds in Theme 5.

Regarding previous experience, three of the participants have prior academic experience working as professors or instructors, while five participants occupied other institutional roles before being ombuds. One ombudsperson noted the value of being familiar with the university as a strength they had filling the role without formal ombuds experience, stating:

> So I think for an ombuds to be successful, I think they have to really understand the culture and context in which they're working at like on a really deep level. I think they also need to understand the different power dynamics that are at play within the organization, whether that is faculty, staff, or student. But also, that comes with understanding those developmental stages, right? I coached an Ombuds who was trying to do conflict resolution training and they said, "Well, I don't really understand why this training that I've done for faculty and staff for years isn't working with students". And I'm like, "Well, I can tell you why. I think developmentally we need to change it up a little bit, right?" Looking at that kind of pedagogy piece. (*School 4)*

Separately, four of the participants hold a doctorate while six do not; four participants have also completed either training or received formal certifications related to conflict analysis and resolution.

Based on the totality of the data about the universities provided by the research participants, one trend that has surfaced is that there is no single path to becoming a University Ombudsperson. The road to University Ombuds is as diverse as the people filling the position, which is important based on the diverse base of clients the ombuds office can expect to serve.

Theme 2: Structure and Responsibilities

This theme will present information derived from interviews conducted with the University Ombuds on the following critical aspects of the University Ombuds structure and responsibilities:

- Chain of Command and Office Structure
- Major Responsibilities and Standards of Practice
- Customers and the Community Ombuds Serve

Chain of Command and Office Structure

Table 4 is a breakdown of how participating University Ombuds are structured:

Table 4

Ombuds Office Structure

School #	Reports To	Ombuds Office Size	Office Location
School 1	Chief of Staff	1-2 Member	Admin
School 2	VP/Chief of Staff Office	1-2 Member	Non-Admin
School 3	President	1-2 Member	Non-Admin
School 4	President	3+ Small Team	Non-Admin
School 5	Chief of Staff	3+ Small Team	Non-Admin
School 6	VP of Executive Affairs	1-2 Member	Non-Admin
School 7	Chancellor	1-2 Member	Admin
School 8	Chancellor	3+ Small Team	Non-Admin
School 9	President	1-2 Member	Admin
School 10	President	3+ Small Team	Non-Admin

All of the University Ombuds report to the Office of the University President in some form. Three schools report directly to the President, while two identified reporting to the President's Chief of Staff. Of the three schools, two of them are considered large; there was no differentiation between school size and to whom the Ombuds Office reports. Other factors that did not seem to have any influence regarding whom the Ombuds reports to are the size of the ombuds office and the ombuds history at the school. Talking to the University Ombuds, the difference between whom the Ombuds reports to was based largely on the President themselves and if they decided it was pertinent for them to have direct lines of communication.

> I used to directly report to the president. When our new president came in, in the summer, they did an org restructure. So, I currently (report to the) Chief of Staff directly. But that's really just for budgeting reasons, was why they did that. So that way the president wouldn't have to like it, say yes to my vacation time, or like kind of watch my budget in that way. (*School 2)*
>
> So, we're originally supervised by the president of the university. Okay. But we have a new president who has now asked that we be supervised by her Chief of Staff. Okay. So it's still the Office of the President, but not the president herself, but rather her Chief of Staff, who is our direct supervisor. (*School 5)*

Interviewees indicated that it is important to have a direct line to the President, but it was noted by at least one Ombuds that they report to the Chief of Staff for administrative purposes but speak directly to the president for reporting trends and providing operational updates.

> If you're not reporting directly to the president or at least, like I am, to the executive vice president who shares office space with this guy, you're in trouble. *(School 6)*

The size of the Ombuds Office can be loosely correlated to the size of the school. The larger schools tend to have a more robust Ombuds effort, which is likely due to increased resources and demand by the population to which the Ombuds Office serves. Several Ombuds voices concern that because of limited resources, their Office was forced to limit their scope of services or simply do the best with what they have.

> First I'll say that there's a bandwidth issue. You know, if we did a tremendous amount of outreach, I think that we would have a rush on our services which might exceed our capacity. So that's a concern. And it might be a sign we need to grow. *(School 8)*
>
> My calendar is full, right? So, part of it is, do we want to advertise? – *School 7*
>
> If this continues to grow and become part of the fabric of the institution again, we (will) need somebody else. I can tell you last March, April, and May, I was so busy. I didn't know which way was up and I can't really handle more than about that. (*School 6)*
>
> I can tell you that I've talked to a number of ombuds already, and one of the major challenges that a lot of them face is that they're too busy, right? They have too many people that are requiring too much. And you want to be able to serve everybody equally. So how do you balance that? And some universities have well, this ombuds or this associate is just focused on students or undergrads versus graduates versus whatnot. But a lot of the ones I've kind of, I don't say singled out, but I've really gone towards more of this all-encompassing talking to everybody. And a lot of them say the challenge they face is they would like to have more people. *(School 9)*

> A key (to our) focus of our office is simply because bandwidth-wise, we have a high number of cases and a relatively small number of staff. I would like us to be doing more training, but it has been a challenge to figure out how to navigate that, and given all the people who are wanting to set up times and appointments and kind of coming in the door. I think if we were able to add another person to increase a little bit of staffing, that is something I would really like to work on. (*School 10)*

It was generally acknowledged by all interviewees that ideally their offices would not be in the administrative building and that their offices should be in a location easily accessible for students to visit without raising attention. Comments from the interviews included:

> I am in the main administration building, which is not ideal, but one of the things that I had suggested when I was offered the position is the former office location would not be viable. And they said, “Well, you know, we could make room within the suite, you know, the president suite”. And I said, “You're lovely, the suites lovely. No, I can't be in the suite”. Same logic. People should not feel like they're walking through the institutional gauntlet. Right. The beauty about this building, however, is that I'm up on the second floor and there are different entrances and exits to the building. (*School 1)*

> So, number one, I wouldn't want to be up on the seventh floor with the president and the provost and all that because I don't need that. Also, people might be seen coming and going. I like that we're very accessible. People can kind of slip in and slip back out. Okay, my perfect office would have a back door, so we didn't have

to send people walking around the lock when they came up on each other.

(School 9)

We are actually in an academic building and that's by design because we don't speak for the administration. We're not in the administration building. And since we're not student advocates, we're not in the student services building. And so, we're actually tucked away down a hallway in an academic building. There's one lab classroom across the hall from us, but there's really never any students in it. It really is a good private space for individuals to come and go and seek assistance.

(School 4)

The reasoning shared by the participants focused on the principles of the International Ombuds Administration (IOA); chiefly, the need for the ombuds to project independence from the school's administration as well as to protect the confidentiality of people using the ombuds service. The main reason many of the participants that do have offices in the Administrative building gave for their location was simply a lack of space in other buildings. They also noted that they assure visitors about their independence and confidentiality when opening an initial discussion.

Major Responsibilities and Standards of Practice

Table 5 is a breakdown of participating University Ombuds self-identified major responsibilities:

Table 5

Ombuds' Primary Functions

School #	Primary Function	School #	Primary Function
School 1	**Conflict Management** *Conflict Resolution* *Listen/Ask Questions* *Conflict Coaching* **Training** **Upward Feedback & Outreach** **Redirect to Additional Resources**	School 6	**Conflict Management** *Listen/Ask Questions* *Conflict Coaching* **Training**
School 2	*Conflict Resolution* *Listen/Ask Questions* *Conflict Coaching* **Training** **Upward Feedback & Outreach**	School 7	**Conflict Management** *Conflict Resolution* *Listen/Ask Questions* *Facilitate Conversations* *Conflict Coaching* **Training** **Upward Feedback & Outreach**
School 3	*Conflict Resolution* **Training** **Upward Feedback & Outreach**	School 8	*Conflict Resolution* *Listen/ Ask Questions* *Conflict Coaching* **Training** **Upward Feedback & Outreach**
School 4	**Conflict Management** *Listen/Ask Questions* *Facilitate Conversations* *Conflict Coaching* **Training** **Upward Feedback & Outreach**	School 9	*Listen/Ask Questions* *Mediation* **Training** **Redirect to Additional Resources**
School 5	**Conflict Management** *Listen/Ask Questions* *Facilitate Conversation* *Mediation* **Training** **Redirect to Additional Resources**	School 10	**Conflict Management** *Conflict Resolution* *Facilitated Conversations* *Mediation* *Conflict Coaching* **Training** **Upward Feedback & Outreach**

The data was coded based on specific terminology used by the interviewees and was broken into four major categories: **Conflict Management**, **Training**, **Upward Feedback & Outreach**, and **Redirect to Additional Resources**. Because of the specificity shared by the participants, Conflict Management includes five subcategories: *Conflict Resolution*, *Listen/Ask Questions*, *Facilitate Conversations*, *Mediation*, and *Conflict Coaching*. These responses were direct answers to the question *"What are your major responsibilities as a University Ombuds?"*. No additional information or clarification was provided to the participant. Although it is possible that ombuds overlooked a major responsibility or did not include a responsibility in their answers, this data provides a strong understanding of how ombuds approach their positions. The articulation of their identified Major Responsibilities is an indication of the priority they place on aspects of their work. Their answers are also reflective of the types of work and situations they are faced with on a normal basis. It is clear that every ombuds functions in Conflict Management, but there is more diversity among the participants as to what that specifically entails.

There were many similarities between the Ombuds' responses. It is clear that every ombuds practices some degree of conflict management and all of the participants indicated that they provide some form of training to members of the university to which they serve. Training ranged from hour-long seminars to large groups to small forum conversations that were topic-driven, to case-by-case training events for individuals or small groups. Larger trainings were largely pre-established regardless of the audience, but as the focus of the training narrowed, the ombuds would customize it to the specific audience based on their needs. Some of the comments about providing training included:

I mean basically, we do a lot of communication stuff. We do conflict drivers, so the wheel of conflict, circle conflict, we do that kind of communication stuff. Looks like I'm going to start working on a project with academic bullying. Incorporating that into our workshop list. We've got a ton of them. And basically, if somebody wants something, I'll whip something up. (*School 9)*

People want additional skills for how to handle conflict, I think that is true. I also think that so many of the challenges that people face are so nuanced and personal that providing general training that they received two years ago may not be applicable to the situation that they're facing when it actually kind of hits them and becomes overwhelming. (*School 10)*

We do go out and do trainings. I'm sure you saw the trainings on our website. We have an update that we have a new raft of about 10, 12 new trainings that we do. I'm trained in compassionate communication, so I have a series of 3 workshops around compassionate communication. (*School 4)*

And sometimes those cases will go beyond just the option structures, (they) will go more into emotional intelligence training. They might go into strategizing and strategy on conflict management. It might be an assessment of conflict styles or colors or the story. Different assessments that I do. *(School 7)*

We do a lot of training. And we do try to tailor it too. We do a lot of training and we do group facilitation. Sometimes we'll go into a group and do a training on what conflict looks like and then the importance of using active listening skills to communicate more effectively. It's really about conflict arising from

> miscommunication. Conflict is a discomforting difference, often arising or resulting from miscommunication. We look at how to define conflict. *(School 5)*

Subcategories were created for Conflict Management due to the broad nature of the response. Conflict Management as a category refers to anything the ombuds do to support at least one party that voluntarily seeks support to resolve a conflict. As the subcategories indicate, there are many approaches that a University Ombuds can take to address conflict, from getting directly involved as a mediator to being a sounding board, to enabling the party or parties to resolve the conflict on their own through mentorship. The need to listen and ask probing questions was the most prevalent approach to conflict management among participants. As one Ombuds highlighted:

> Number one, I think, my major overriding responsibility is always to listen to people. And that's pretty much what I do. I listen to people a lot... Everybody needs somebody to listen. But sometimes people need the options presented a little bit more dramatically. Sometimes they need to go on that journey themselves. (*School 9)*

Conflict Coaching was identified by the majority of ombuds, second only to Listening and Asking Questions, as a means of Conflict Management. Conflict Coaching refers to ombuds working one-on-one with a visitor to develop personal conflict resolution and ADR skills to positively manage situations (Jones & Brinkert, 2008, pp.4-5). It was described by participants as:

> The primary work, I think the predominant (work), would be coaching and one-on-one sessions with individuals. We have a process where they first hear about our ethics and see if they have any questions. And then they tell me the

> challenging situation they're in. They talk through it. And then we think about their goals, their priorities, what they're hoping for, and discuss possibilities. *(School 8)*
>
> My job is to have a conversation with them about what their idea and goal of resolution is, what does resolution look like, and what kind of steps and conversations they can have to achieve that. (*School 7)*
>
> We're working with students, right? A lot of the time we want to make working (with them) our philosophy, right? Making working with our office an educative process so that they are learning the skills to manage the conflict themselves. And so I think we find ourselves, because of that, in that conflict coaching space, more like let's talk you through how you have that difficult conversation so that you can talk to your professor. *(School 4)*

Several differences stood out between the various respondents. Only two respondents (**School 5** and **School 9**) identified *Redirecting to Additional Resources* as a major responsibility of theirs; this refers to directing visitors to additional (or at times more appropriate) resources to support their needs. Those two schools are of similar size and both of the ombuds interviewed from the schools had a background in sociology; however, there were no other similarities that might account for those specific schools standing out. Another result that stands out is the lack of mediation offered by most of the University Ombuds. This is likely not an oversight by the participant when answering the stated question as mediation can require additional training or certifications based on one's location. Mediation can also involve legal aspects of a conflict, which most of the University Ombuds in this study lacked, so official mediation is likely done by someone outside of the university entirely.

Regarding standards of practice, in response to the question "What standards of practice are you as a University Ombuds held to?" all of the participants answered they were held to IOA standards. As stated in previous chapters, those standards include confidentiality, neutrality, independence, and informality. Of the IOA standards, three respondents additionally emphasized confidentiality as an important aspect of their work and that being the standard they most emphasize with visitors. Said two respondents about confidentially:

> I take that confidentiality extremely seriously and we take measures to not keep records and to maintain it, you know, in other ways. *(School 8)*
>
> I always tell everybody without question that confidentiality is the foundation of all of that. *(School 6)*

In addition to IOA standards, a couple of participants mentioned additional standards to which they are held accountable or hold themselves accountable. **School 4** shared that integrity was an important standard to which they hold themselves and a second respondent shared that justice was an important standard they hold themselves to. **School 1** shared this thought about justice as a standard for University Ombuds:

> The four ethical guidelines of confidentiality, informality, impartiality, and independence, they had one that they called the preeminent value. However, I saw the preeminent value as one that really impelled or gave meaning to the other four, and that was justice…So that was really important to me. As part of the appeal for Ombuds, understanding that we are impartial or neutral depending on the preferred term. But indeed, we may advocate for justice, for procedural fairness, for processes that are more equitably minded, all of that. I understand that we're not justice seekers for individuals per se, but we look for that. And

> ombudsmen arrived on US campuses at a time of activism and social justice seeking…. I always have justice in the back of my mind. *(School 1)*

Customers and the Community Ombuds Serve

A university is comprised of many groups to whom the Ombuds is beholden to serve. Based on the 10 interviews, there are five communities the Ombuds spend their time serving: Undergraduate students, Graduate students, Faculty, Staff, and Other/Community. Other/Community includes parents of students and external members of the community with no formal affiliation to the University itself. All except one of the Ombuds indicated that they serve all five of the identified categories. The single school that does not serve all five categories stated that they are limited to serving Graduate Students, Faculty, and Staff and that Undergraduate Students have other resources at their disposal. Though they did not specify external customers or interests, based on the conversation complaints and interactions from the external community are likely managed by a different service at the University.

Theme 3: Ombuds in Action

This theme will present information derived from interviews conducted with University Ombuds on the following critical aspects of how University Ombuds approach their positions and the challenges they face:

- Challenges Faced
- Time Management
- External Coordination
- Trend Analysis and Reporting
- Approaching Groups

Magnitude Coding

Magnitude Coding was applied to the data collected in this section. It is a method of coding that utilizes supplemental alphanumeric codes to indicate response frequency, intensity, direction, or evaluative content (Sage Publications, 2020, p.71-72). In the context of this research, codes were developed based on the frequency of responses given by the participants. Responses were grouped and categorized into five categories. Note that this coding format will also be used in the following themes of this section.

Table 6

Magnitude Coding

Magnitude Coding		
Code	*Meaning*	*Frequency*
A	Always	10
M	Mostly	7-9
O	Often	4-6
R	Rarely	1-3
N	Never	0

Challenges Faced

Participants were asked the open-ended question "*What challenges do you face as a University Ombuds*". They spoke openly and provided multiple challenges they faced, which are reflected in the table. The following is a breakdown of challenges the interviewees identified during the interviews:

Table 7

Challenges Faced

Challenges	Frequency	Magnitude
Personal	7	M
Awareness of Ombuds	6	O
Lack of Formal Processes	5	O
Visitors	5	O
Burnout	1	R
Lack of Training	1	R
Bandwidth & Priorities	6	O
Reporting	4	O
Politics & Work Role	4	O

Through first- and second-order coding, four specific themes were identified as challenges University Ombuds face regularly. They are Personal, Bandwidth & Priorities, Reporting, and Politics & Work Role. Personal challenges refer to issues the ombuds feel are somewhat within their control or that they can influence or are somewhat specific to their current situation. Bandwidth & Priorities were largely associated with a high demand for ombuds services that can stretch the office thin. Reporting challenges often refer to how ombuds publish their information, either through open (public) or closed (private) means. Politics & Work Role challenges refer to issues related to the position as it stands at the university, for example, Title IX reporting, and navigating through university bureaucracy; it does not refer to the execution of their duties as ombuds as identified in the previous theme. Additionally, coding yielded several subcategories under Personal challenges. These were distinct issues identified by the ombuds when they discussed what they deemed to be personal challenges. The subcategories are Awareness of Ombuds, Lack of Formal Processes, Visitors, and Burnout. Awareness of Ombuds

refers to the university community not being aware that the ombuds office exists and that they provide a variety of support services. Lack of Formal Processes is partially a result of the IOA pillar, Informality, though in this case, it can have a detrimental effect if it is too informal (more detail will follow).

Every University Ombuds interviewee faced challenges in their position. Those ranged based on numerous factors, but most of them shared a variety of personal challenges. The majority of ombuds indicated that a lack of awareness about their office and position was a major challenge and drove many of them to conduct campus outreach through a variety of means, which is discussed later in this section. Comments about awareness of Ombuds on campus include:

> I think still one of the biggest challenges is knowledge of the office. With the turnover of students every couple of years, with a turnover of faculty and staff. You know, I think we've had a lot more than I would (expect). It's getting the word out so people know what we are. I think, for me in particular, what I would say has been a challenge, has been the leadership churn. (*School 4)*
>
> I think right now our biggest challenge is just getting the word out and getting people used to the idea and what we're here for and hopefully getting more people to use it. (*School 3)*
>
> I think one of the challenges we face is awareness of our office, even though it's been around for a long time, even though I've been in the role for a long time. Whether people are aware of us, you know, it's like universities (are) like a river. It changes all the time. So it's not made up of the same people. So that is a challenge. And what that challenge leads to is if people aren't aware of us, then

> they don't have conversations with us early on in a situation. If they find us, they may find us only at the tail end of a situation where they have fewer options. So that is one ever-present challenge for an Ombuds office. *(School 10)*

Additionally, a lack of formal processes and visitors were both mentioned by half of the participants. Challenges related to the lack of formal processing included administrative burdens, out-of-date school policies, and sometimes feeling like they were unable to act effectively and freely because they value the IOA standards. Comments provided by study participants related to the lack of formal processes include:

> Like any university, the policies and procedures, you think they're all nice and tidy, and no, they're not. Some of them haven't been updated in ten years and they're outdated. And that's a little bit of a challenge. *(School 6)*
>
> I would say that the previous ombuds here, and I to a certain extent, have always been challenged by process. (Specifically), I think organizational processes. *(School 5)*

None of the ombuds referred to challenges posed by visitors as overly burdensome as many reflected that it is part of the University Ombud's charge. However, the diversity of visitors, the relationships between visitors and the ombuds, and the types of conflict the visitors bring to the ombuds all pose challenges for the participants. Interviewees specifically shared the following thoughts regarding the challenges visitors pose:

> The really challenging ones are where you have a student who is in conflict with a professor and those evaluative relationships, supervisor or subordinate or professor or student. Those are always more difficult because you're dealing with

> two different classifications and students' expectations, particularly undergrads, so they're just all over the place. *(School 6)*
>
> Performance improvement plans are always a challenge. And so helping employees from all over navigate that is a real challenge because they're so (varied) and people are always afraid of losing their job if they get a performance improvement plan. *(School 5)*
>
> Some of the things (we) kind of talked about, some challenges that you face in this role when it comes to students not being prepared for confrontation or expecting other people to kind of do things for them. *(School 2)*

Separately, one ombuds specifically discussed potential burnout as a challenge. Although it was only mentioned in that specific term by one participant, it is included in this discussion because several other ombuds discussed similar issues, feeling stretched thin, hardships prioritizing their workloads, and the lack of support and resources needed to more fully do their jobs. The following quote was shared about burnout:

> You have to have a sense of your capacity to do work that's oftentimes really emotionally draining because you're talking to people sometimes in crisis. So I think that's a challenge. I think it can be challenging to keep track of all of the information you need to know to be able to give people the best referrals possible, to give them a sense of what their options might be. It's not like I know everything, but I try to maintain an awareness of different conduits for reporting, and different conduits for getting help. It's a lot of information. *(School 8)*

Time Management

This section presents information shared by the study participants related to two specific questions during the interviews:

- *How do you, as a University Ombuds, spend your time?*
- *What does a "day in the life" of a University Ombuds look like for you?*

Almost all of the Ombuds explained that no two days ever seem to be the same, so the latter question was somewhat of a challenge for many to answer. However, many shared what their routines and priorities are on a daily and weekly basis. The following is a breakdown of how the interviewees prioritize their days and the common requirements for the position:

Table 8

Persistent Priorities and Requirements

Routine Requirements	Frequency	Magnitude
Helping Visitors	10	A
Outreach	7	M
Training Others	7	M
Feedback Up & Out	4	O

It was clear that the first and foremost priority of all interviewed University Ombuds was to directly support visitors to their offices. Visitors generally ranged from walk-ins, appointments, and follow-up conversations. Visitors were not limited to in-person meetings but included virtual sessions and phone calls depending on the comfort level and ease of access for the visitor. Of note, multiple Ombuds specifically mentioned preferring to meet in person but COVID forced Ombuds to embrace distance approaches to supporting their community. One Ombuds summed it up by saying:

> We work largely remotely at this point. It was always a challenge for us to be available at the seven workplaces, the three campuses, and the four medical centers. So doing Zoom and hybrid allows us to do that. I still very much like to have facilitation mediations in person, and also whenever possible, to have leadership meetings in person. But frankly, individual meetings like this can be done by Zoom or Skype or whatever. *(School 10)*

About the importance and prioritization of helping visitors, participants shared the following thoughts:

> I think my primary responsibility is providing excellent ombuds services to visitors. So handling the caseload, individuals who come to us through Zoom, telephone, or in-person meetings. *(School 8)*

> People are often encouraged to visit us first to explore informal ways of like improving the work situation, either from the supervisor's perspective or the employee's perspective. *(School 5)*

> Some of (it is) really transactional stuff like, “Oh, you know, my professor said this. What does it mean?” “Well, it could mean this., I see the email. Here's how some people might respond. And this is what it means”. You know, some of what I do is, I'll translate from chair speak and professor speak for students where the chair said this or sweeping under the rug. And I can say, “Well, no, actually they're acknowledging that you've given them notice.” … It could be a lot. So some days I have six or seven visitors where they're just like, boom, boom, boom, boom, boom. My ideal day would be a couple of visitors in the morning, so

> maybe three or so visitors in the morning, and then doing a workshop in the afternoon. That would be kind of the ideal day. (*School 9)*

> Many students will come in and they'll tell me their problem. They want me to fix it. If they're like, "Oh, that's a great answer. Okay, you go do that." And I'm like, "No. Yeah, don't do that. You need to do that." So then I'm training them on how to do that, right? I'm teaching them. I'll do a lot of mock interviews with students (who) come in. So they're having a problem with a faculty member. They're really nervous about talking to them or they're not sure what to do or they're really angry. And they're emotional (and) they can't get past it. So I'll say, "Hey, let's do a mock. What are the answers you want from this conversation?" *(School 2)*

Seven respondents noted that Outreach was another routine undertaking of theirs. Outreach is in direct relation to the perceived lack of awareness of ombuds at the university, as identified in the previous section as a major challenge the majority of ombuds face. Based on the interview responses, walkabouts, handing out fliers, speaking engagements, and various forms of student or faculty meetings are all examples of the types of outreach University Ombuds undertake. Additional thoughts shared by the participants include:

> Usually, during a regular week, I'll be doing outreach, whether it's the lunches, walking around campus, going to an event of any kind I try to go. *(School 2)*

> I'm, for instance, going to all the colleges' faculty meetings and the faculty senate and all that. Our traffic is pretty light still, and we just opened the office to students. Originally, it was only open for staff and faculty but now we're opening it to students as well. So, we're trying to get that word out too. *(School 3)*

> (I do) outreach to all those offices that are faculty and staff. So that's just faculty and staff organizations and the thousands and thousands of faculty that are there and then understanding contracts and policies and. So yeah, it's a lot. It's a lot. There's a lot of meetings and then I also open the office to do presentations and trainings and workshops. (*School 7)*

> Secondary responsibilities include things like performing office outreach, which could mean going to sort of a campus fair and handing out brochures. It could mean giving presentations that (range from) quite brief to orientation. So that might be thousands of people you speak to at once. It could be giving an outreach presentation that's much more involved, perhaps 30 minutes or even an hour discussing the intricacies of the work we do. Which might be at the invitation of individual units, a department, a group of staff, you know. (*School 8)*

Seven respondents also noted that Training Others takes up a significant portion of their time. Training events ranged from one-on-one and small groups to larger organizations, departments, and colleges. Sometimes an organization requests specific training based on a situation, usually a conflict they have experienced or anticipate occurring and the ombuds presents tools and approaches to managing the conflict. In addition to conflict response training, improving communication, conducting facilitated conversations, and teaching front-line leaders basic mediation techniques are all examples of training the University Ombuds mentioned they conduct frequently. The participants shared some of the following ideas:

> We do it with groups when they want something, you know when they want to do some work, we do it. There's a lot of ways, if people are finding there's conflict around them, that you can say “we're going to meet to talk about the conflict”. A

> lot of times that's not as productive because people get defensive. But instead, "Hey, we're going to talk about some tools that could work". (*School 9)*
>
> The other upshot of training is that it can be a really useful way to create connections and awareness of the office. So just to show value, to show that, "Hey, we are credible folks who think about this a lot and do hard work". *(School 10)*
>
> It's really two things primarily. One is to facilitate conflict resolution. So, I think of us as navigators or guides, to help people navigate conflict informally. (*School 3)*
>
> I think a lot of our training is grounded in observed challenges. You know, its roots are in the casework that I deal with every day. And then that gets translated into research of finding resources and thinking about developing a training, which then gets translated into the workshop itself. (*School 8)*

Finally, "feedback up and out" was often mentioned by University Ombuds in this study. This includes direct communication with deans, faculty directors, student leadership, college chairs, and University councils in addition to standing meetings they have with the University President or the president's leadership team. The focus of the feedback sessions is usually centered on trends the Ombuds has identified either specific to an organization or the school as a whole, or regarding specific instances or complaints that have come up within an organization that the Ombuds feels an organization's leadership should be aware of. The ombudsperson adheres to IOA standards and does not share any information that could compromise the confidentiality of any individuals or parties involved in the trends or conflicts. Some of the University Ombuds specifically said:

> It's my role and within my job description to not necessarily be a cheerleader for (the University), but to hold them accountable to be better. *(School 7)*
>
> It's to help improve relations at the university overall by giving feedback to the administration on sort of major issues or things that people are not happy about. *(School 3)*
>
> Providing systemic feedback to the university itself. Our very first ombuds back in (the 1960s) said that the Ombuds role consists of five things. Listening, advising, explaining, referring, reviewing. So reviewing university (policies) and procedures, but (they) said that the most important of all those things is listening. And that should be before, above, and beyond anything else is being able to listen. *(School 4)*

Additional comments shared by the ombuds regarding how they spend their time include:

> It's a very diverse population (on campus) and then you have to do all the background work, you know, connecting with folks on behalf of others and do check-ins with folks. (***School 5)***
>
> It's interesting that, as an ombuds, that people are asked to come to my office to share their struggles, share their conflicts, share their concerns, share the conflicting dynamics with the systems that are existing within (the University) and the institution. Hopefully make it better, to find resolutions, to find spaces to maneuver through. And my job as that ombuds is also to share how (the University) can be better. *(School 7)*
>
> The third piece or the third thing I would say that we're responsible for is providing systemic feedback oftentimes to leaders. So, in the academic world, I

> know a lot of deans, provosts, chancellors, the president, and on the (other) side and the staff side, a lot of directors, managers. So, helping them to see trends, issues that they may not otherwise be aware of. Helping to highlight policies or impacts of policies that may be problematic. Looking at equity and challenges that particular populations may be having and navigating aspects of the university. *(School 10)*

> Every one of these circumstances is different, which is one of the things I love about it, is that I never know what's going to come in the door. I've got somebody visiting with me today when we finish. I have a visitor scheduled. I have no idea what the visit's about. And there's a level of unknowing that's actually, to me, it's endearing to the position. I don't know what's getting ready to happen for my last hour and a half on the job today or two hours. *(School 6)*

External Coordination

This section focuses on two specific aspects of external coordination and communication that University Ombuds undertake in their position:

- Raising Awareness of Ombuds Services
- Partnership Building

The first aspect, Raising Awareness of Ombuds Services, builds on how they spend their time conducting outreach from the previous section. Coding helped to identify seven distinct categories and three associated subcategories of how the Ombuds approach reaching out to the university community. The categories, broken out and ordered based on magnitude coding, are:

Table 9

Means of Raising Awareness

Means of Raising Awareness	Frequency	Magnitude
Campus Functions	7	M
Orientations	6	O
Organizational Fairs	4	O
Miscellaneous Campus Meetings	2	R
Partnership Engagement	5	O
Campus Presence	4	O
Media	4	O
Referrals	4	O
Reporting	3	R
Training	2	R

Most ombuds indicated that attending campus functions is an important aspect of community outreach to raise awareness of their presence and services offered. It can be challenging for Offices to attend events frequently, especially for those that consist of one or possibly two members in the ombuds office, given the importance of helping visitors as the Ombuds' first priority. Two specific functions were often mentioned by respondents, Orientations and Organizational fairs. These are usually planned with significant advanced notice, making it easier for Ombuds to attend given what could be described as their unpredictable daily schedules. Here are several comments from research participants when addressing the value of attending campus functions:

> One way is campus fairs. We have created brochures and other print materials that explain succinctly what we do and who we serve and how to get in touch with us. You go, you meet people, you introduce yourself, you hand out the brochure. A

second mechanism would be finding the right campus spaces to enter into and giving presentations about what we do. So, faculty government, for instance, would give you an opportunity, or staff government, an opportunity to meet the people who are the most involved and explain to them that if you could bring this information back to your individual units, that would be helpful. (*School 8)*

I've made it much less academic and just, come in and I don't even use PowerPoint anymore. I've given up on PowerPoints unless I have a more formal one. I just come in and start talking to them and give them examples that I know exist. If there's 50 people in the room, I'll give a couple of examples that I know hit 10% of (them) and I'll talk about how you deal with that. What would you do in this circumstance? Get them thinking about "what am I going to do about this" or "what am I going to do if this happens to me" versus having me come up and be that sage on the stage talking about how vital my role is. (*School 6)*

Going to the staff council. Going to different staff offices. And we have a presentation we put together. I went to the new faculty orientation. I'm going to table this week at a freshman kind of orientation course that all freshmen take. *(School 3)*

I did a table at the student organization fair, and I had over 100 students come visit my table. I did a new faculty orientation. Our office does a virtual new employee training with all faculty and staff monthly. They let me put two slides in there about my office with all my contact info. I'll do outreach in what I call informational interviews. I'll reach out to the head registrar, and I'll say, "Hey, I'm the Ombuds. This is what Ombuds is". (*School 2)*

Partnership engagement was the second most common category identified through coding. Finding the right partner provided new avenues to reach wider audiences. Participants shared several examples of how they leverage strategic partnering to raise awareness of their offices. The most prominent of which was to piggyback off of their partner's meetings, which provides an opportunity for the ombuds to address a pre-assembled audience. This approach is also applied through written media, where the ombuds shared that they sometimes try to contribute to another organization's newsletter. A third utilization of strategic partnerships is to deliberately network to create collaborative education sessions, allowing the ombuds to work with other services to amplify their respective messages.

> Sometimes it's with one person, I'll go meet with a dean or a vice president. Usually ask them, "Hey, can I get into your staff meeting? Can I get into your department meeting?" I think I've talked to more than 1500 (people) at this point, individual people and probably 120, I think 125 different venues, some of which are Zoom. I attend different meetings and I always ask them if they lose a speaker, let me talk for five minutes. The outreach has been busy. *(School 6)*

> I will send out messages through the Human Resources newsletter. We are present at the new student orientation. Trying to think of everywhere where we've been. We've done podcasts. When COVID happened, for instance, our associate provost was doing fireside chats, so I was a guest at one of their fireside chats. We go and we speak to the three university student governments- our undergraduate student government, our graduate student government, and our resident halls' student government at least once if not twice a year. We're doing a lot of things along those lines to get our message out there. *(School 4)*

> I've also worked very hard at institutionalizing the office and building relationships so that I can do more collaborative educational things. *(School 1)*

> We each have a list of university partners that are kind of key allies effectively in the work. And (we) just trying to keep tabs on folks. We have a lot of quarterly meetings that we set up, so we'll meet with deans, sometimes chairs, and other leaders every three months. And then (members of) my team also have people that they meet with on a regular basis. (*School 10)*

Maintaining a Campus Presence goes beyond attending orientations, fairs, and meetings. The four ombuds who spoke about being present explained that the approach to raising awareness of Ombuds on campus was less structured and focused on being visible and available for students outside of their office. Having lunch at the student cafeteria, sitting at a table in a high visibility area with a lot of foot traffic, and campus walkabouts. They might have a badge or some other means of identifying that they are ombuds and they go up and talk to people. Holding informal chats does not have to be focused on conflict resolution, but on helping the campus community understand that there are additional resources available to them. Comments shared by ombuds regarding *being present* include:

> Go out there and show up. I showed up and like, “Hey, I'm here. If anybody has any questions”. And they're like, “it's not punitive. It's not?” Yeah, it's a fun place to go… Showing up everywhere. One thing I started doing was I did some shadowing at our new faculty orientation and then at the end of the day, they have a resource fair. I'm like, “Well, I'm on a table here”. Yeah, so four hours a week during the summer (I am at a table). *(School 9)*

> Previously when I started at a new office, the campus was small enough that I ultimately walked to almost every office on campus just to say hello. That's not possible at a place that has tens of thousands of community members.– ***School 8***

> I try to go to the lunch hour, dining hall. I try to go there at least once or twice a week and kind of just walk around and sit with different people. I may know every time I worked with them, I went to the orientation. They have a lunch thing. I've done that… I'll just walk campus once a day and go in a different direction, usually with my badge on, like "I'm the ombuds". And then I'll just chat with random fraternities. I'll go say hi and chat, you know, a club will be doing something, I'll go say hi. So, I just try to be extroverted. (*School 2)*

Even though only four ombuds specifically mentioned *being present* in the described fashion as a means of raising awareness, it is highly likely most if not all of the ombuds interviewed approach similarly spreading the word of ombuds. One possible major prohibitor of ombuds officers from *being present* is that they are already stretched too thin, either as an office of one or two people or their workload is already at maximum capacity. This chapter already noted concerns shared by School 8 regarding how successful outreach would likely push their office beyond its capacity to serve their community (revisit page 8 for more quotes about limited bandwidth and outreach).

Media and Referrals were also mentioned often by the ombuds. Media included both print and digital media and ranged from brochures and their websites to newsletters and their formal reporting mechanisms. All of the University Ombuds that participated in this study had updated information, including multiple forms of contact information; their sites were easy to navigate and find online. Additionally, almost all of the email addresses for the ombuds office

went to a distribution list and not a personal email address and were structured in the following manner: ombuds@(university).edu. The websites also included telephone numbers, providing an alternate means for potential visitors to initiate communication in a manner that provides anonymity. Said one ombuds about the value of media to raise ombuds awareness:

> We just had a bunch of posters created by the graduate students, so they posted them in every building on every academic floor throughout the entire university. So that's also a new technique that we're using as of recently to help pull traffic in. *(School 7)*
>
> Maintaining a good clear website that communicates what we do, what we don't do, and who we serve. I think that's key. *(School 8)*
>
> I'm getting out there on the web pages, you know, the faculty handbook. *(School 6)*

Referrals are not only a means to build the ombuds network on community members, but also serve as a measure of success for the ombuds (this will be addressed in more detail later in Theme 5 of this chapter). Sometimes a referral is for other people who are in a similar conflict as the ombud's visitor and the visitor feels comfortable sharing with their friend or colleague that the ombuds helped them. Two ombuds briefly discussed the value of reputation when it comes to getting referrals, stating:

> I understand that we have to (advertise) to a certain extent keep new graduates coming in and those types of things. But faculty and staff, they know (us), they send people in, they refer. A lot of it is based on reputation. *(School 7)*

> Through good casework, you can create kind of word-of-mouth such that people who are in difficult situations might be referred to us by their colleagues. *(School 8)*

Trend Analysis and Reporting

The core of this section is focused on providing information directly related to the study's main research question: How do University Ombuds approach serving as change agents within their organizations? To serve as a change agent, an ombuds needs to be able to both identify trends within their organization and influence university community members to act, as it is not within the ombud's charge to direct the actions of others. One means of influencing change is through reporting, which explains the criticality of whom the Ombuds directly report to and the accessibility Ombuds have to University leadership at all levels. This section focuses on two significant aspects of University Ombuds responsibilities, Trend Identification and Reporting. Specific questions that this section addresses are:

- How do University Ombuds most effectively identify trends within their organizations that should be addressed?
- How do Ombuds navigate through challenges related to reporting findings?

Trend Identification and Analysis. Trend identification and analysis are centered on identifying a need for change within an organization based on observed and reported behaviors, how to approach converting observations into action, and how University Ombuds approach change without formal positional authority. This section also addresses the following previously stated sub-questions:

- How does the University Ombuds approach instilling change without formal, supervisory authority?

- What specific actions do Ombuds take to address change in the workforce?

The consensus between the participants was that there is no single way to approach identifying trends and the need for change within an organization. Leveraging both an Ombud's interpersonal skills and the work role's relationship with school leaders was the predominant means of promoting change according to almost all of the ombuds interviewed. Many ombuds expressed the value of trust, soft skills, and positional access to university leaders as a means of encouraging change (trust and soft power will be presented in detail in the next theme).

Depending on the type of problem, sometimes a visitor will bring a concern or issue to the ombuds office and the ombuds will research to determine if there is a simple course of action that would allow for the problem to be addressed at the lowest level. One example shared by multiple ombuds referenced the application of various policies to the university community; someone could raise a concern that they feel they are being treated unfairly or are concerned about a situation based on feedback they were given about the rules or a procedure. The ombuds take the time to research what the policy is and if they notice an incorrect application of the rule or if there is a false interpretation, they will directly reach out to the administrator or organization and have a conversation with them about it. One ombuds explained what is likely a common source of conflict within schools:

> Instances where there was a procedural practice that people referred to as policy, but it was really a procedural practice that generated from within the institution that wasn't mandated by federal guidelines or regulation of any kind. *(School 1)*

Highlighting a wrongfully applied rule is not the only instance where an ombuds gets involved with policies. Several ombuds noted the importance of being aware of changing landscapes not only at their schools but nationally and within the institutions of higher learning,

as well as federal laws and regulations that may be changed or coming. Although it was not mentioned a single time in the ombuds' major responsibilities, several noted that it is important to stay abreast of potential external changes as they will inevitably influence the university. Ombuds observe these potential changes through their conflict analysis and resolution lens and report to University leadership any future concerns the ombuds might identify. One ombuds noted:

> So that's another way of change is being attentive to the winds if you will. Are you sniffing something out in the higher education arena nationwide? What are our practices here? *(School 1)*

Pivoting from policy concerns, many visitors bring interpersonal conflict or informal complaints about a group or organization. Several ombuds noted a lack of communication between parties that have noticed since COVID temporarily halted direct interaction between parties.

> I find a lot of times, especially post-COVID departments, faculty, staff, students, anything, are having these conflict communication issues, a lack of understanding of how to communicate with each other anymore. And then the issues that I've been getting at the university that are kind of trends I'm following, say one is that issue of a that lack of ability to communicate across the board, especially with middle management. *(School 2)*

Other specific examples of trends that the ombuds specified they identified involved inequitable power dynamics, academic integrity, and accessibility for disabled people. All of those trends were identified through a visitor or several visitors bringing an issue to the ombuds and the ombuds doing subsequent informal research.

> (An issue) comes to light through the Ombuds office. And it's something I might just inform whoever it applies to that this problem exists. Okay, for instance, with the accessibility issue, I reached out to our disability services and just said, "Hey, you know, do you guys do anything with this?" So I've kind of been informally reaching out to different offices when things come up. *(School 3)*

Identifying trends is most commonly approached through observation and by speaking with visitors and members of the university community. It is the first step, but certainly not the final step, towards conflict resolution. To solve interpersonal conflicts between two parties, ombuds can utilize the many tools within their ADR toolbox. However, for systematic issues, one ombuds noted the utilization of shuttle diplomacy to address a concern. This approach maintains the conflict at a lower level with an unstated understanding that if the conflict is not resolved directly between the two parties it could potentially be elevated to higher school authorities. One example shared by one school:

> There are situations where we might do that shuttle diplomacy back and forth like to say, "Okay, I hear what you're telling me. I have some concerns about the power dynamics in this space." *(School 4)*

Other ombuds discussed networking and using feedback as a powerful tool for encouraging positive change behavior. They noted that being a member of working groups helps provide a means for feedback to be shared openly while maintaining confidentiality to protect any vulnerable party. This emphasizes the value on which ombuds placed developing professional networks and being present on campus to not only students but faculty, staff, and organizational leaders.

It is important to remember that just because a trend is identified and action can be taken to rectify a situation does not necessarily mean that results will always be immediate. One ombuds noted:

> And sometimes it may take generations to really get at some institutional change. *(School 1)*

School 7 also addressed the need for working with senior leaders to enact change at the university. This can be a very effective approach to enacting change based on trends and input from visitors.

> Regardless of what the issue is or the trend that you're seeing, you'll essentially approach the higher-ups and then work with them to make sure it trickles down. (*School 7)*

Reporting. Identifying and analyzing trends may be the first steps towards ombuds acting as agents of change but what one does with their trend analysis can be considered the catalyst to altering behavior to achieve a desired outcome. Reporting findings to the appropriate parties, in an appropriate manner, is critical to the role of ombuds. Reporting goes well beyond the traditional and periodic summary reports administrators may expect from the University Ombuds. The ombuds interviewed for this research indicated that they relied heavily on informal feedback and reporting to leaders across their academic communities. Informal reporting can take many forms but focuses primarily on two means: periodic updates and ad hoc check-ins. The following data presented focuses on answering the following questions:

- What are an ombud's mechanisms for reporting trends and findings?
- Who are the primary receivers of ombuds reporting?

Formal Reporting Mechanisms

Published Reporting. All the ombuds interviewed indicated that they either already produce or are in the process of establishing an annual report which at a minimum goes directly to university leadership. Two of the ombuds indicated that they also produce quarterly reports. Although reporting can vary based on the authors of the annual reports as well as the expectations of the university leaders, participants indicated that their reports usually include both qualitative and quantitative information. The reports and the data included are useful in presenting the ombuds' workload and trends that they identify to their leadership. Some of the most relevant comments about annual reporting by research participants include:

> We collect information about who utilizes our services via category grad, student, undergrad, professional faculty, classified staff, those kinds of categories. And then we also report on patterns of concern issues. So, we collect the trend data and then we report it quarterly and then annually. *(School 5)*
>
> We provide yearly reports to the administration based on that data sheet of what types of things have brought people in and then what are our suggested kind of remedies for those. *(School 3)*
>
> I would say kind of the bigger picture would be an annual report. *School 2*
>
> I also let the president's office know my list of standard keepers or standard bearers as part of my annual report. *(School 1)*
>
> I think I need to give some basic data about what I'm doing with my time. You know, I'm serving this number of students, this number of faculty. These are the types of issues that are that are dominant. That's going to be the gist of what I

> think is going to end up being a two- or three-page report with about three or four little pie charts or bar graphs, and that's all it's going to be on it. *(School 6)*
>
> That's where I'll talk about, here's some areas we can work on. Here's some things we've done that have been successful. So yeah, the reports. I have a quarterly report. An annual report. And it can be pretty dry because basically, I'm just saying, “Hey, here's how many people we met?” I tracked the contacts and the visitors. So, a unique visitor is basically somebody I (just met). (I also) roll the visitors over on a quarterly basis. I track visitors and then contacts. Basically, every meeting I have with them, whether it's remote, or phone, or in person. (*School 9)*

One question ombuds face regarding the dissemination of their reports is whether they should be made public or remain in private channels within the university. Of the 10 universities whose ombuds responded, 4 of them publicize their reports while 6 do not. It is possible to find public reports through simple internet searches or by visiting the ombuds websites. Two ombuds shared contrasting views as to why they publish their reports publicly vs privately which both largely centered on accountability and whether an ombuds should hold the school accountable for the actions and trends identified in the report.

> That's a very interesting question because (UNIVERSITY NAME) is a private institution, so it does not fall under state regulations of transparency. But because of the nature of my office and its autonomy and independence. I made the independent decision to which the Chancellor (agreed). Whether or not he trusted it or not. My annual report is public. (*School 7)*

> My job is to just provide them with trends of what I'm seeing and recommendations for what they could possibly do, but not to put them on a timer. *(School 2)*

Recurring Meetings. In addition to the published reports, all of the ombuds discussed the recurring meetings they have with university leaders, starting with the President's office and usually down to deans and college chairs. These meetings usually occur between once every month to every quarter and center on the ombuds providing trend analysis, highlighting potential and upcoming challenges the receiver of the information should be aware of, and, when appropriate, recommendations to address current and future challenges.

> So every month when I'm meeting with the Chief of Staff, I have some updated data at least to share, right? And say, "Hey, this is what's going on folks". So that might include real basics, like the number of cases thus far in the fiscal year and the number of visitors thus far in the fiscal year. So, if I have in Week 1, 10 cases comprised of 15 visitors, that means at least one case has more than one visitor associated. How many contacts does that look like with the visitor? What are the top-level demographics? How many are generated from undergraduate students, graduate students, faculty, staff, and other affiliates in the annual. *(School 1)*

> And my approach with dealing with anybody in the administration, whether it's the president or the provost or the deans, I meet regularly with the deans, like once a semester with the deans, just to kind of stay up there. *(School 9)*

> The only other way that we do would be individual meetings with leadership, which some years we're better than others about doing that. But that would be meetings that I would be having specifically with deans, chancellors, the athletic

> director, head of human resources, effectively kind of the C-suit of the university sharing with them. *(School 10)*

Informal Reporting Mechanisms

Based on the interviews, just as important as the formal reporting mechanisms is an ombuds informal approach to communicating trends and concerns to university leaders. The biggest difference between the formal and informal reporting mechanisms, for the sake of this paper, is the recurring and scheduled meetings between leaders and ombuds versus ad hoc communications. Formal reporting mechanisms also tend to include, based on participants' responses, higher levels of leadership whereas informal reporting seems to be more focused on lower levels of leadership, working from the ground up. Here is one statement from an ombuds that exemplifies a mostly shared approach to addressing conflicts and issues at lower levels:

> I'd say that's one of the big kinds of avenues for feedback with undergraduates. Those tend to be more one-on-one with their leadership, with the student leadership. Then I would say if we're seeing something more, not like a university-wide issue, but let's say we are seeing multiple graduate students about an issue with a graduate advisor. In those situations, we might reach out to a chair of an academic unit or we might reach out to the associate dean of graduate studies in that college and say, "Hey, you know, I've heard from 4 or 5 students. This is what their experience has been with this advisor. I think you need to look into it a little bit more." Without revealing, usually I let students know that I'm going to do that, but I don't provide enough information where it would necessarily identify the student. *(School 4)*

Challenges of Reporting. Despite the incredible value and importance of ombuds reporting, it is not without its challenges. The ombuds shared that those challenges tend not to stem from the mechanisms of reporting and in fact can be attributed to the management of time, expectations, and even personalities. A potential concern for ombuds is to avoid gaining a reputation similar to "the boy who cried wolf", where everything is a concern or issue that needs to be shared with top university leadership and addressed immediately. Additionally, because ombuds operate with much greater independence than many of their counterparts and other bodies within the university and because of the sometimes-sensitive nature of their work, some campus leaders may only cautiously approach university ombuds or harbor feelings of suspicion towards them. These challenges were shared by several ombuds:

> Hard to get in front of all the leaders. It's just hard to have enough time. *(School 10)*

> Sometimes you have to prioritize and there's only so many suggestions or recommendations you can make at a monthly meeting. *(School 1)*

> I typically will raise the concern either higher or laterally if it's something major. *(School 2)*

> We've had some leadership feathers really ruffled because all of a sudden, the ombuds know something that they don't. *(School 5)*

It is also worth noting that one ombuds interviewed stated that they did not feel it was within their purview to decide whether change was necessary. They explained that they are charged with observing and reporting major concerns up their chain, but that getting involved to enact change at a level above interpersonal conflict resolution was not something they felt was their responsibility. They stated:

> I think the question is: Is it my call to make? What needs to be changed? And I think the answer is no, probably not. (*School 8)*

Sub-Organizations: Approaches, Challenges, and Reporting

Approaching Sub-Organizations. This section focuses on sub-organizations within the university and understanding how the Ombuds approach them similarly or differently. These categories of sub-organizations include students, faculty, staff, and university leadership; some ombuds separated students between graduate and undergraduate students. This section will address the following questions posed at the start of this study:

- Do Ombuds approach sub-organizations within their university differently?
- What, if any, are differences between sub-organizations supported by University Ombuds as they relate to organizational, interpersonal, or departmental conflict?
- What challenges, if any, are associated with different groups and how do they vary?

Answers varied greatly between the Ombuds when asked if they approach groups within their organization differently. Respondents were categorized based on their extended responses into one of three categories: **Same**, **Tailored**, or **Similar but Distinct**. The **Same** approach refers to ombuds maintaining consistency and uniformity in their treatment of visitors regardless of group (undergrad students, graduate students, faculty, staff, leadership, etc) whereas **Tailored** refers to specific and individualized treatment of visitors based on their category. **Similar but Distinct** is the hybrid approach equivalent to equitable but not equal; the groups are not treated the same based on their positions within the university largely because different groups have different needs and priorities and approach conflict and the Ombuds differently. However, the level of support and underlying approaches to providing support are similar across the groups. Magnitude coding of the results are:

Table 10

Approaching Sub-Organizations

Approach	Frequency	Magnitude
Similar but Distinct	5	O
Tailored	2	R
Same	2	R

It is worth noting that the data presented is based on the totality of information provided by the respondents. Almost half of the respondents provided multiple answers during the conversation when addressing this question. Six of the participants initially responded that they approach all sub-organizations the **Same**; however, when they discussed their approaches in more detail, four of them described a hybrid model that is more accurately captured in the category **Similar but Distinct**. The discrepancy is likely because people, in this case ombuds, believe that they treat everyone fairly and equally, but those are not mutually exclusive. It is more accurate to state that, based on one of the responses from the interviews, ombuds tend to treat everyone fairly and equitably. Additionally, two respondents distinctly discussed having both **Tailored** approaches and the **Same** approach, one respondent claimed to have the **Same** approach and a **Same but Different** approach. One respondent also answered that they take all three approaches. Any instance that included multiple responses was included in the hybrid category.

When responding that they take the **Same** approach, the two respondents stated the following:

> I don't think I've approached any one of them differently in terms of my attitude. I don't treat them differently. To answer your question, I really don't think I do. If I am, I'm completely unaware of it. *(School 6)*

> Every level is the same. They get advice or they get options. They do not get advice. And so and we'll talk through those processes. We might talk through the strategy by the end end of our meeting. Hopefully, they have a staggered plan of what? Of what they're going to do, but it's their plan. Yeah, pretty overtly clear. *(School 7)*

When responding that they take the **Tailored** approach, the two respondents stated the following:

> So when I'm working with visitors, recognizing kind of where they're at in the hierarchy, I think impacts my approach, but also recognizing the disciplinary culture they're coming from because business has a very different feel than arts. *(School 4)*

> I feel that I'm treated with respect in return because I know I have a sense of where and how they have to operate. I know the stresses that they have teaching classes and not being able to take time off sometimes for dependent care. I have a deep feeling. *(School 5)*

Several of the respondents indicated that they always intend to treat visitors the same, but as they described their approaches to the various sub-organizations it became clear that they do customize their approach and support. Some respondents stated the following:

> My ideal answer is no, right? Because I'm supposed to be impartial. I'm supposed to be independent. So, I hope in my practice that I don't treat them differently. I mean, of course, I have more background knowledge (about) like faculty

> experiences, but other than that, I hope I wouldn't treat them any differently. *(School 3)*
>
> I feel like I approach them the same. I definitely know I approach students and staff the same. I give them the same attention to whatever they ask for. *(School 2)*
>
> There are different ways, everybody's got their challenges. Students can be very vulnerable in a lot of ways. But what I've seen is that even the most senior people can also feel very vulnerable. So, I like to take the same approach, which is, “Hey. You're sitting across from me, you're the expert. You know this”. *(School 9)*

For many of the ombuds, a hybrid approach to supporting visitors based on their standing within the university made the most sense. One respondent provided an accurate depiction that sums up what many of the respondents alluded to.

> It's kind of the same three-room house that we would use. But the square footage may be different based upon the complexity of the person who's coming in. So, our three steps are first, we allocate a good amount of time to telling the story and making sure that we've kind of unpacked the full extent of the situation so that we can be a thought partner. The second piece is that we get very clear and explicit on goals, not what we assume the goals to be, but really what the other person is hoping to see happen. And then we shift over to options in order to put together a tangible game plan so that the person leaves that one session with a better sense of how they want to move forward. And for a faculty member who's been at the university for 34 years and is in the midst of some sort of challenge related to their retirement and legacy and relationship with colleagues and, and, and. you know, that's a lot that's going to require more square footage than for an

> undergrad student who's concerned about a grade that they got in a class last quarter and what is the grade appeal process. We can use the same three-step process. It's a lot less square footage. So, for student cases, we often schedule for shorter amounts of time, 45 minutes or an hour. For staff and faculty, we schedule either an hour and 15 or an hour and a half. We don't go over an hour and a half with anyone, that's kind of a hard stop for us. But that's kind of the basic contours of our process. (*School 10)*

School 9 originally indicated that they treat everyone the same, but explained:

> Say I start out from the same position, but no two of them are alike. *(School 9)*

School 2 also originally indicated that they treat everyone the same. However, they also went on to explain the nuances of working with specific sub-organizations:

> And because I'm staff, I don't want them to take me the wrong way. But anything I do say, I get a little more reserved when they're talking. I'll let them talk more rather because I know usually they know what they want. They're prepared and whatever. I will, very hesitantly, provide them (with guidance), depending on how I can tell. Are they a business professor and they have no communication skills? Are they engineering and they know? But yeah, I'd say I'm a little more reserved with them. (Florida Tech). *(School 2)*

There are several distinct reasons provided by respondents as to why they elect a hybrid approach to supporting visitors, including resource allocation for various sub-organizations and the culture surrounding the groups.

> When you talk about training, who are you providing those training opportunities to primarily? It depends. I would say probably staff and graduate students would

> be primarily now, (but) that could shift, and that comes down, I think again, to other resources faculty often have at a major university. A lot of resources for training and professional development. But graduate students or staff may have fewer. *(School 8)*

> I think one of the key things for an ombuds to recognize is each one of those colleges has a different culture, right? And a different leadership structure and knowing how to navigate that space, I think is a skill in and of itself. I was talking with a graduate student this morning and asked them to tell me what their program was in because I was going to make a recommendation for them to go to the associate dean for graduate studies. *(School 4)*

School 8 also pointed out that different sub-organizations are equipped differently to manage their burdens and that the ombuds approach each group similarly but will adjust based on the developing needs of the visitor.

> Maybe there's a judgment at times as to whether somebody is able, themselves, to clearly articulate the issue they're concerned about. And so there may be times when I feel I need to take a larger role in making sure that the problem or challenge is clearly communicated to the person empowered to have an impact. So, for instance, with the student, it may be perhaps that they might need more help. It just depends. *(School 8)*

Two schools highlighted that regardless of the sub-organization, they are sensitive to the fact that visitors need to come to their conclusions on their own terms. Both mentioned that they adjust their approach based on visitor needs, but aim for a similar conclusion, which is the essence of equitability.

> Largely yes, I think I do approach them in similar ways. In part because I think the way we handle casework has a very established process of clarifying their goals and giving emphasis to the agency of the person who came to see me. Don't make decisions for them. Don't tell them what to do. I help them think through their goals and what it is that they could do. They stay in control. And so that's true of an undergraduate student and it's true of a dean or a full professor. *(School 8)*

> It doesn't matter if it's the undergrad, the grad, the faculty, or staff. We're going to do the same thing. And I have to provide opportunity, right? Because if I give advice and they follow that advice and it goes well and it works, I've taken away their power to say that was my resolution. *(School 7)*

Different Challenges between Sub-Organizations. All of the ombuds acknowledged differences between the categories outlined in this section. These differences make it harder for ombuds to approach sub-organizations similarly. The commonality of challenges shared between each sub-organization is that every group has problems, issues, or concerns, some level of conflict that they need assistance in overcoming. That similarity should be attributed to human nature and is not isolated to any singular academic environment. One statement by a school best captures the challenges faced by different categories in the university environment:

> We are all humans. We all have similar problems. But it's very different working with an undergrad who's having a challenge in a class group or a challenge working with a faculty member for the first time versus a university leader who's trying to figure out how to get two different directors on the same page and their constituent teams and at the same time push through a reorg and manage their

> own mental health. We do see real differences. And I would say there's real differences even between undergrad students and graduate students. And there's a real difference between the number of resources that the university has for these different populations. Undergrads have a lot of resources. Graduate students have some resource staff, but not that much faculty at the (University), often not that much. Academic leaders not that much. And so where we found ourselves to be most beneficial are in the places where the university does not have sufficient resources to support the challenges or the complexity. So I'm most engaged, and I think we work the most, on faculty, staff, and graduate student issues. Maybe it would be staff, faculty, and graduate students, but those are kind of the populations that we end up working most with**.** ***(****School 10)*

Four ombuds specifically spoke about approaching university faculty differently than any other sub-organization. They attributed faculty as more challenging because faculty tends to have more ownership in their position at the university in addition to having a longer history at the school compared to students that have natural and cyclical turnover. The following statements focused on faculty as a group receiving ombuds support:

> Faculty, I will say, because I know how (they) tend to be kind of opinionated. And (faculty) feel like they have a lot of rights or a lot of standing. Like their voice, to them, is very more important. I'll let them talk more rather than (other visitors) because I know, usually, they know what they want. *(School 2)*

> I think faculty treat me differently. I think faculty have a deeper ownership of this role. Faculty will just draw a line in the sand and say, “This is the way it's going

> to be". And they're wrong sometimes, but it's not my job to judge whether they're wrong. (***School 6)***

Several ombuds also shared their experiences working with students as a sub-organization and the differences between other groups. It was made clear that their approaches towards student visitors are different than others because of the nature of students' issues and inter-group power dynamics not being equal. The concerns students share are often academic concerning grades or interpersonal conflict with professors.

> About 80% of what we deal with is academic in nature. So that's grade disputes. It's "I feel like I was unfairly charged with academic misconduct. I feel like I was misadvised I'm being bullied by my advisor". The other 20 to 25% are nonacademic issues. So it could be an issue with housing, or it could be financial aid. *(School 4)*

> For a student-on-student issue, I'm typically more into it and I would say because (they are) students I feel like I have more authority, they're going to see me as an authority figure. I have more ability to talk to them and have a dialog, where it's not an inner staff issue or something like that. Now, when it's a student with a faculty or a student with the department, I will try to liaise some because I feel like the students get too emotional or they can't see everything. And so I will really try to help them liaison with what their actual intent is and what their wants are without having the emotional part of it. *(School 2)*

Specifically related to power dynamics, two ombuds stated:

> The really challenging ones are where you have a student who is in conflict with a professor and those evaluative relationships, supervisor or subordinate or professor or student. Those are always more difficult because you're dealing with two different classifications and students' expectations, particularly undergrads, are just all over the place. *(School 6)*

> Graduate students tend to be either interested in peer-related conflicts or power dynamics with a faculty member who is a supervisor, sometimes as an advisor, sometimes it has some academic components to it with graduation and things like that, which are a little more rare. But the majority are power dynamics between supervisor, advisor, and student researcher. *(School 7)*

Noticeably absent from most of the interviews was any discussion by the ombuds about supporting senior leaders as a group at the university. Several hypotheses could explain the lack of support for university leaders. It is possible that senior leaders do not seek ombuds support to help resolve conflict. Senior leaders usually have more experience in their environment and could head off conflict at its nascency without needing ombuds expertise. Senior leaders may also carry a sentiment of the adage “A lion does not concern himself with the opinions of the sheep” where they do not find themselves in conflict with others simply because they are not concerned with what others think. Regardless of why Senior Leaders do or do not seek ombuds support, they are not immune to conflict. One ombuds that has dealt with Senior Leaders shared their approach to supporting that specific category:

> If you're talking to a very senior person, I'm not going to contradict him. I'm not going to go toe-to-toe with him and trade punches with them. They're coming at

> me. I'm like, “Well, okay, you may feel that”. And then after usually about 40 minutes or so, they will punch themselves out. And even if they shot down everything I've said in the first 40 minutes, they'll usually become more agreeable. And a lot of times, I told them something 20 minutes in, and then 40 minutes in, they repeat it like they came up with it. And I'll just say, “Yeah, that's a great idea”. Because again, my goal is to help them move forward, not for me to prove that I'm smarter than them, so I don't care what it takes**.** ***(****School 9)*

School 4 discussed working with student leaders as a means to enact change within and across sub-organizations. They stated:

> I think one of the ways that I've leveraged that is to talk and communicate with the student leadership. I think one of the things that's easy to forget about is they are part of the governance structures and they are part of the leadership. And I think when we often talk about our sources of leadership and higher education, we forget about our student governments and how powerful they can be. *(School 4)*

Different Approaches to Change Agency. University Ombuds varied largely in their responses to approaching change differently between sub-organizations. Some identified specific groups as more receptive to change agency while others noted that they maintain a similar approach regardless of the audience to whom they are addressing. The diversity of responses makes it more likely that an ombuds approach to change between groups is more based on the ombuds as a person rather than that of a position and how that individual can reach across multiple organizations and levels to encourage change. The following statements highlight the array of responses and approaches University Ombuds take to change amongst different sub-organizations at their universities and the divergent experiences they have encountered:

> I'd say with students it's a little bit easier because they're more open and more casual with things. I would say with staff concerns or administrative concerns, it can be a little trickier because I'm also someone who works here, right? So yeah, you want to make sure you're keeping good relations, but you also kind of have to push things. *(School 2)*
>
> When you're at a large institution, you need to be able to not only navigate the institutional culture but also recognize that there are different power dynamics at play depending on where the person's positionality is, as well as recognizing that there are also different disciplinary cultures at play, too**.** ***(****School 4)*
>
> The style of how we do our work doesn't change. *(School 5)*

Different Approaches to Reporting. As discussed, University Ombuds have a variety of approaches to reporting trends and findings to partners and leaders at their schools. Each of those approaches is usually tailored to a specific audience with a specific message intended to be transmitted. Sometimes the reason for an interaction is to inform while other times it might be to encourage action.

When asked about changing their approach to reporting based on the population they are addressing, **School 8** stated the following, which captures the essence of what many ombuds shared during the research process:

> Absolutely. I think being able to make judgment calls about information that might be especially pertinent to individuals in certain roles, somebody who is in charge of faculty or academics might be interested to hear more about insights related to tenure, the tenure process or authorship, or things like that. Whereas somebody who's more interested or invested in student affairs might be interested

in any insights we have about student life, like maybe housing or something. So yeah, that can shape it and then we'll answer any questions, of course. But bringing to them what we think is particularly salient to them, to their role is part of it. *(School 8)*

Theme 4: The Abstract and Intangibles

This theme will present information derived from interviews conducted with University Ombuds on the following critical aspects of how University Ombuds approach intangible aspects of their duties:

- Trust
- Building Soft Power
- Philosophy of Ombuds

Trust

Interview participants were asked how they foster trust, as University Ombuds, with their numerous stakeholders. These stakeholders include the many groups and organizations that have already been identified in this paper: the community they serve, the visitors they meet, and the partners they collaborate with. The respondents provided five key factors to how they approach trust building in their position: **Personality, Confidentiality, Standards, Relationships, and Integrity**. Below is the magnitude and a visual breakdown of the frequency of responses.

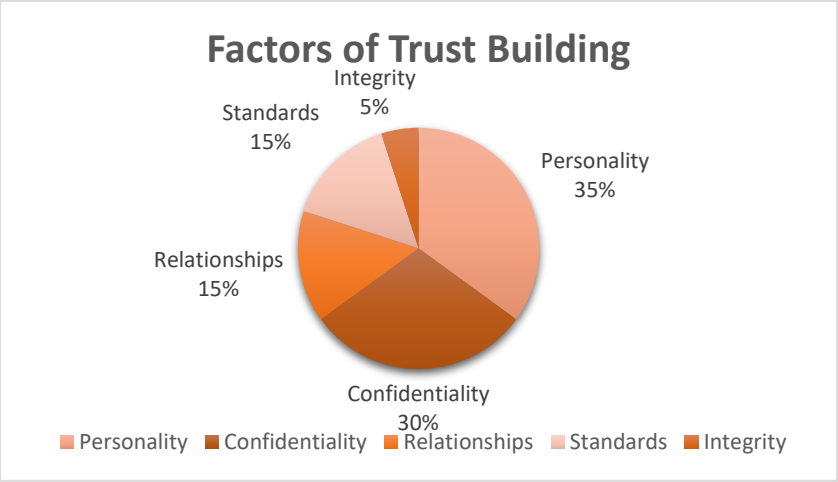
Table 11

Factors of Trust Building

Key Factor	Frequency	Magnitude
Personality	7	M
Confidentiality	6	O
Relationships	3	R
Standards	3	R
Integrity	1	R

Figure 4

Factors of Trust Building



Personality is a combination of several responses that speak to the character of the specific person filling the role of ombuds; the other factors are more aligned to the position of ombuds regardless of who may fill the role. Several elements were mentioned by the ombuds regarding how their personality was a major contributor to trust building at their university. These elements included authenticity, reputation, willingness to help regardless of the situation, and maintaining cultural awareness of their surroundings. Additionally, several ombuds emphasized their ability to listen, stating:

> I have an unconditional willingness to listen to whatever their story is. That's my secret power as an ombuds. *(School 7)*

> From the get-go, just having a calming presence with them, listening to them, not being combative or forceful as much as possible. *(School 2)*

> (They might say,) “Well, I'm sure you heard about this”. I'm like, “Well, I want to hear your perspective. And like, I'm not interested in what the dean said or I want to hear what you what you see”. So that tends to help people. *(School 9)*

Other respondents attributed their success at trust building to being persistent and diligent in maintaining their unbiased impression across the university community, stating:

> You avoid even the appearance of any kind of bias or other impropriety. That's key as well… Trying to be scrupulous in the most positive sense I think is one way that trust is preserved, and it takes time. *(School 8)*

> (My predecessors) would have monthly meetings with the associate Provost for undergraduate education and the associate provost for graduate education. One of the concerns I always had about that is the lens of neutrality, right? If we are always meeting with the administrators, what does that say about our role? And so I've had a concerted effort that I regularly meet with (students). *(School 4)*

Two ombuds spoke about being culturally aware of the climate in which the campus functions as well as being sensitive to the needs of individuals that they work with from both a positional and generational lens. They stated:

> So we have the informal and the formal culture and I would say ombuds, because we're so informal, we have to have our pulse on the informal and the formal culture. *(School 5)*

> I'll bring up stuff for students about, “I remember doing that when I was a student” or “when I was in student services”, and I'm young enough to (connect with them). With staff, obviously, I'm now staff myself so I can get those

> nuances. And sometimes they're like, “Yeah, students just don't understand”. (I'll respond), “I understand this generation's got this, this, or that”. So I will tailor it according to what they're coming in for, but I (treat) them the same, they want to work with me more or less. *(School 2)*

Confidentiality was the second-most common aspect of trust building shared by ombuds. As discussed at length, confidentiality is one of the core principles of the IOA and is a standard all ombuds adhere to. However, building trust cannot be based on set standards. Instead, building trust is based on adherence to said standards and several ombuds pointed out that referrals send a strong message across the community that ombuds respect and adhere to a visitor’s or party’s right to confidential support. Comments focused on the importance of confidentiality included:

> I think part of it is just going to be word of mouth, like people using the office and being like, “Hey, you know, it actually is confidential**”.** ***(****School 3)*

> A big part of it is through confidentiality. So whether it's the clients coming in that we're meeting with or the leaders and others. Kind of folks that we work with at the university. It is for them to realize that our office is a place where information can be shared discreetly and confidentially. As a result of that, then people feel open to having discussions with us. And I think kind of being humble or vulnerable enough for us to kind of have discussions with them that are meaningful. So I feel like that's a really big part of it. *(School 10)*

> I think number two is not betraying that trust, not telling anybody. A lot of times I can look pretty dumb. I even had a visitor call me out on this. He was like, “You don't know this, and you're the ombuds. You don't know anything”. In fact, I

> knew it all. But I'm not going to betray confidentiality just so I can see smarter**.** ***(****School 9)*
>
> Good work, honoring confidentiality, doing follow-ups, being gentle and kind in how we communicate with people, making sure that we're not advocates, that we are neutral, and that we treat both parties fairly. *(School 5)*

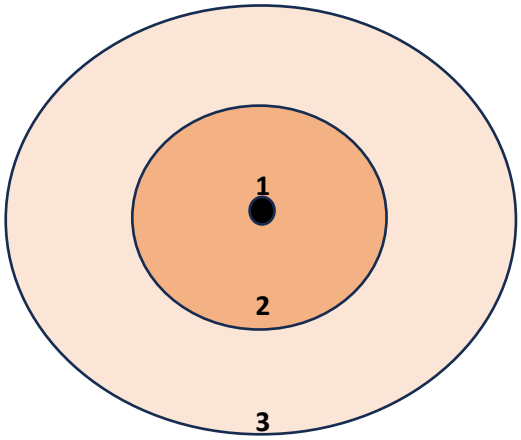
Confidentiality is a criteria by which ombuds are held but it is the suite of standards that help drive trust and success for ombuds. **School 8** summarized the value of **Standards** that help build trust in University Ombuds:

> Every opportunity you have, whether its individual meetings or outreach events, you emphasize the standards of practice and the importance with which you take them. So that's the first thing. The second is really the demeanor and daily adherence to those same standards. You know, it's easy to lose trust. I mean, you do one bad thing and you've perhaps irreparably damaged it. So I think part of trust is consistency. Maybe that's embedded within the definition itself. And so being able to show forth that consistency, I think that confidence speaks for itself. *(School 8)*

Relationships were noted with the same frequency as standards as a means of building trust across the academic institution. For University Ombuds, building trust based on relationships is comprised of first- and second-order relationships, where first-order relationships are the people the ombuds interact with directly, and second-order relationships are people that interact with the people that interact with the ombuds.

Figure 5

First- and Second-Order Relationships



1 - University Ombuds

2 - First-Order Relationship

Previous Visitors

Partners & Collaborators

University Leadership

3 - Second-Order Relationship

Potential Future Visitors

Colleagues/Friends/Acquaintances of First-Order Individuals

Comments made by the ombuds regarding relationships included:

> Everyone on campus knows (us). So (we) have a lot of credibility in that sense. And I'm kind of similar like this is one way in which I think other roles actually serve the Ombuds office because I already know the President well, I know the administrators well and they already listen to me. *(School 3)*
>
> Our student leadership, whether it's the president of the undergraduate government or the president of the graduate student government, and they all know that they have just as much access to me as any administrator does on campus. *(School 4)*
>
> Our partners in general counsel and HR, if we are sharing thoughtfully and timely with them areas of concern, then they trust us and respect our informal process and will then encourage people to come and utilize us as well. *(School 5)*

Trust of Sub-Organizations. The ombuds' responses to trust building would indicate that University Ombuds have adopted a homogeneous approach to building trust among different

school populations. This is proven true based on participant answers when asked if they approach trust-building in the same manner or differently depending on the level within the organization which they are interacting with. Trust is essential for ombuds to function in their position and the scope of the interaction seems to not influence how they approach building trust across their academic institutes. Several of the ombuds stated in no uncertain terms:

> Try to do it the same. No matter who it is, I try to be very informal. I try not to be super formal because I feel like that can catch people off guard or make people a little more nervous. *(School 2)*

> Board of trustees, all the way down to the janitor. Big old ear on my cape that says I will listen. That's it. That's regardless of the level, right? It doesn't matter if they're students, graduates, or whatever. *(School 7)*

One school did highlight some differences they take to building trust between sub-organizations but noted that their approach is not based on the visitor's position at the university but on the visitor's willingness to engage with the ombuds. This approach would still constitute removing population bias from consideration and instead emphasize the need for individualized and custom support every person or party requires from the ombuds. The school stated:

> It really depends on how open they are to engaging with us. Generally, (people) don't have to engage with us. So trust building, in my estimation, needs to involve some sort of value add as well. They need to see that having a conversation or engagement with the Ombuds office is in their best interest. And that can happen because they're worried that I report to the president and something will be shared. I don't think that that's a really viable way to do this. It's not the way that I like to do this. So instead, I like to come present my team as thought partners who

> are helpful as people are navigating really complex situations. We have a new athletic director, at least an interim, it's reaching out to that person, letting them know that I'm available as a thought partner, confidentially, as they're grappling with all the changes in the athletic department. Will (they) take me up on it? I don't know, but it's a trust-building exercise to reach out, offer that. And then if and when (they) take me up on it, make sure that I am honoring the conversation. I'm meeting with (them) in a timely way. We're showing up, we're prepared, and whatever we agree to do, we are doing. So, you know, it's not overpromising or underdelivering. I think that's a real challenge. *(School 10)*

One school noted that conversations they have are approached differently based on the audience they are interacting with, but upon providing more detail it was evident that the changes to their approach could be considered largely superficial. The core of their approach was based on highlighting shared experiences with the people they interact with. The ombuds has an extensive history with the school as both a student and in various faculty and staff positions. They relied on commonalities and being able to discuss shared experiences as a foundation for building trust.

> I think the conversations look different. How I present myself in those spaces may look different. If I'm talking with a student versus talking with an administrator. I also happen to be a parent, so my (child) is (attending the university), so in some way telling them, “Well, I was once a student here and I'm also a parent”. *(School 4}*

Building Soft Power

The position of ombuds is one that intentionally lacks formal authority. However, that does not mean that ombuds do not wield a degree of influence. They often find themselves in a position of impact at both the interpersonal as well as organizational levels. In this research, University Ombuds have demonstrated a pattern of effectiveness that can be largely attributed to their utilization of soft power. Soft power, by definition, is the ability to influence, attract, and persuade others (Nye, 2005). This is in stark contrast to what is referred to as hard power, or the ability to coerce. What the position lacks in formal authority, it makes up for by leveraging informal influence and the accessibility that comes with being an Ombuds. **School 8** shared this thought about ombuds and the value of soft power:

> I can't hold anybody accountable. I have no power. It's that soft power, that persuasive capacity. It might be that because the change doesn't happen. Another visitor comes to the Ombuds office to discuss their negative experience with the policy and that enables yet another route for asking the question once more. And maybe the visitor themselves is empowered, feel themselves empowered after thinking through it to try and raise things through the chain of command. *(School 8)*

This section focuses on the sources of a University Ombuds soft power. Research participants were asked from where they derived their soft power and their responses identified four main sources. University Ombuds identified that they derive their soft power from **Positional Reporting**, **Personality**, **Relationships**, and **Standards**. Below is a breakdown of their responses, including the frequency and magnitude of the responses.

Table 12

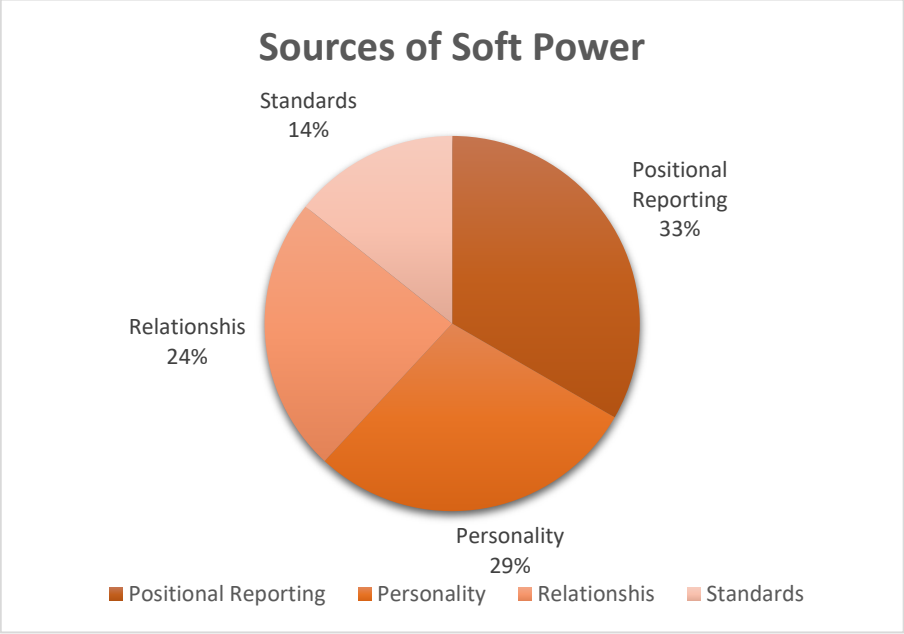
Sources of Soft Power

Key Factor	Frequency	Magnitude
Positional Reporting	7	M
Personality	6	O
Relationships	5	O
Standards	3	R

Figure 6 is a visualization of the responses (most ombuds provided more than one source of soft power), where the percentage is calculated based on the total number of all responses provided. Figure 6 shows the value of each of the sources compared to one another.

Figure 6

Sources of Soft Power



The most commonly identified source of soft power for University Ombuds was their **Positional Reporting**, which refers to their direct line of communication to the top echelon of

leaders at their institution. It has already been documented that University Ombuds are afforded the utmost degree of independence, which is required for the position to be successful. Reporting directly to the school's president, provost, or executive body sends a clear message to all parties, organizations, and individuals at the University that the ombuds are trusted and that they have the ear of the top decision-makers. **School 6** summarized why positional reporting matters:

> I think people know that while I don't have my own hammer, there is an expectation, at least at the executive and administrative levels of the institution, that they will grant me a tremendous amount of grace to get things accomplished. *(School 6)*

Additional comments made about the value of positional reporting include:

> (Under university policy) I'm a direct report to the president. In my contract, it says president and provost, so that's really where I derive my soft power from. I have the ability to go to them if I so choose. *(School 4)*

> I think part of it is where the reporting line from my office is. So I don't report to any of the deans or chancellors that I meet with, which means I get to speak truth to power. I also personally am someone who's pretty confident having those conversations with people in positions of power and having conversations when I don't have responsibilities to take on the situation. That could be just a function of personality or past training. Also institutional setup. And then we really do benefit also from being an office that has simply been around for a long time. *(School 10)*

Just as with trust building, **Personality** is also a major source of soft power for University Ombuds. General aspects of personality, which are comprised of what is referred to as soft skills,

that contribute to an ombud's soft power include trustworthiness, credibility, and reputation. Several ombuds stated the following about utilizing deriving soft power from the strength of personality:

> When an Ombuds is selected, it's typically someone that has had a reputation at the institution already as being somebody that is trustworthy and someone that people feel like they can come and talk to. *(School 4)*
>
> (We) already have credibility built on campus so that when we bring issues to (leaders) from this channel, we will be listened to. *(School 3)*
>
> The only way that you derive true power is through influence. And the only way to be influential is to be patient. *(School 1)*
>
> Soft power comes from building trust so that people can talk with us openly. *(School 5)*

One ombuds took the idea of soft power a step more granular, referring to their ability to create a safe space for open and honest communication and thought sharing. Creating a safe space for individuals to feel comfortable sharing their thoughts and emotions is critical to allowing Ombuds to support a visitor's needs. About where they derive their soft power, one ombuds stated:

> (I derive my soft power) from their stories. That's where my strength comes from, Right? I open the door and create the space for them to share their experience, no matter what my worldview is, no matter what my personal politics or perceptions are, they can come in and talk terribly about (anything). I can hear it. I'm not going to be upset by that**.** ***(****School 7)*

Relationships were another source of soft power noted often by research participants. When asked about sources of soft power, several ombuds shared the following thoughts:

> But the soft power comes in with relationships. *(School 5)*

> And so I think that's one of the ways that I exercise that soft power with students, is really saying, "Look, yes, I may be a report to the president, but you also have to understand that you have just as much access to me as anybody else here on campus". *(School 4)*

> And then at the same time, when they see the chancellor walk over and talk to me, they're like, "okay, yeah, he really does have a good relationship with that guy". *(School 7)*

Philosophy of Ombuds

During the interviews, the 10 participants shared their approaches to being University Ombuds. This paper has detailed the requirements and methods for fulfilling their roles, their tactics and attitudes towards being agents of change through trend identification and analysis, and the avenues they utilize to report their findings. This section will further develop additional considerations they shared regarding how they view their positions and the attributes they focus their attention on to provide the most effective support to the University to which they serve. Some of the concepts have been briefly presented already, such as **Cultural Awareness**, while some have been detailed more exhaustively, such as **IOA Standards**, but they both deserve further consideration. Other key factors about how Ombuds approach their positions and responsibilities include **Empowerment**, **Creating a Safe Space**, **Respectful Treatment**,

Therapy, and **Continuous Self Development**. Below is a breakdown of their responses, including the frequency and magnitude of the responses.

Table 13

Approaches to Ombuds

Key Factor	Frequency	Magnitude
Empowerment	7	M
Cultural Awareness	5	O
IOA Standards	5	O
Creating a Safe Space	4	O
Respectful Treatment	4	O
Therapy	2	R
Continuous Self Development	2	R

Empowerment is a means of providing guidance and assistance to visitors to help them solve their own problems as much as possible. It requires the ombuds to serve as an educator, sounding board, and coach. It also means that ombuds avoid providing advice, advocacy, and direct guidance. Several strategies and theories are being developed in the field of Conflict Resolution that focus on empowering disadvantaged parties and at-risk populations to enable them to solve conflicts (Cheldelin, Druckman, & Fast, 2008). This emphasizes the importance and value of empowerment and explains why most study participants highlighted it as a central approach to ombuds. Most ombuds interviewed spoke about empowering those around them and some of their comments related to empowerment were:

> I come from an empowerment model. My goal is to empower an individual so that they can go through conflict and then add tools to their tool belt and go forth with these new tools and try them out. If they work, great. If they don't, they know they can come back and get more tools. And that way, if by not telling them

what to do or giving them advice, as soon as I give advice, I take away an individual's power. *(School 7)*

I think it's because the Office has always had this philosophy that we lead with education first. (*School 4)*

I'm the Ombuds and I'm here to listen to your story to help you and to find some strategies to fix your problem. *(School 6)*

Several ombuds felt it prudent to emphasize that do not provide direction but guidance when empowering their visitors, stating:

I help people explore their options, but I don't ever say, “Oh, this system is so working against you”. (*School 5)*

It's not like I'm going to solve the problem. I'll help give them a sounding board or direct them to resources. And that's help. I never tell people what to do. And I always feel like the visitor really knows what's going on. *(School 9*)

Different ombuds have different takes on this. I think for me, there's a real sort of thoughtfulness and concern that goes into making it clear that I'm not trying to advocate for a particular position or change. I just want to help somebody act as a thought partner, to help somebody think through whether it's working the way they think it ought to. *(School 8)*

School 7 highlighted one of their core teachings with people seeking support, highlighting that there is more to learn through conflict than ADR concepts:

I’ll say something like “Conflict is not a sign of failure, conflict is an opportunity to learn more about yourself and the people you work with”. *(School 7)*

Finally, **School 2** best captured the general and shared sentiment behind providing educational opportunities and empowering visitors, stating:

> The best kind of person is an informed person to then move forward with their issue. *(School 2)*

This section will avoid belaboring certain aspects of the University Ombuds' approach to their charge, but it is appropriate to highlight a couple of additional comments made regarding **Cultural Awareness** and the importance of an ombuds being in tune with their community. This is intended to belittle the value of cultural awareness as it was ***often*** mentioned by ombuds as critical to their work.

One of the smaller school ombuds shared their approach to remaining culturally aware of the environment on campus, which not only helps them stay abreast of the winds as they may change but also helps them raise awareness of ombuds on campus. They shared:

> I try to be in the atmosphere of the university and have pick-up conversations with anyone and let them tell me what's going on. *(School 2)*

The benchmark for any ombuds, **IOA Standards** provide clear parameters and expectations for appropriate behaviors for the ombuds community writ large. How ombuds interpret the standards can vary slightly based on the campus environment and the individual filling the role of ombuds. These three ombuds shared how they safeguard and apply their standards to their everyday approach to being an ombuds, stating:

> We treat the office like it's a jewel. It's valuable. The resource that we provide isn't replicated anywhere on campus. And so we don't enter into any engagement, any outreach, if we feel it's going to compromise the integrity of the office or compromise the standards of practice. *(School 4)*

> I don't spend a lot of time on campus when I'm not working. And even if I get opportunities that I personally find interesting, for instance, to meet with certain people, serve on certain committees, there are times when I feel that they jeopardize the standards in a way such that I decline to preserve that independence to the greatest extent possible, both in appearance and actuality. *(School 8)*

> One of those big pieces being voluntariness. I've had a few people say, "I'm going to have him come talk to (me)". You know, you can ask him to come talk to me. He doesn't want to come talk to me. You can't force that. And they're like, "Well, I'm a supervisor". No, it doesn't work that way. If it's going to work, if it's going to work in an informal way, he's got to be a partner in this or she or whoever they are. *(School 6)*

By adhering to IOA standards and being culturally aware of the campus atmosphere, it will be easier for ombuds to **Create a Safe Space** for their visitors to be open and honest sharing their thoughts and feelings about a difficult situation. Creating a safe space entails the ombuds listening actively, demonstrating empathy, and withholding judgment of any kind. The following comments were shared by research participants focused on creating a safe space:

> It's my job as an ombuds to create that space, create that environment, and create the opportunity, whether it's for an individual, a number of individuals as a small group or a large group, or a department. *(School 7)*

> I'm definitely aware that people have different communication styles. If their English is not their first language, they're going to tell the story differently. They're going to be maybe super polite and their English will be different. I would

> say people underestimate the importance of asking folks how they want to communicate and creating boundaries around communication. *(School 5)*
>
> It isn't always so much about conflict resolution as it is providing that listening and empathetic ear. *(School 4)*
>
> I think our campus needs people feeling like they're being heard and they have a seat at the table to have a conversation, and that everyone matters. *(School 2)*

Respect is vital to any professional relationship or setting. Almost half of the University Ombuds interviewed still felt it was important to emphasize **Respectful Treatment** as a key factor they work consciously towards promoting with visitors, partners, and campus leaders. Of note, **School 1** was the only participant who highlighted working with people who may present resistance. They stated:

> You need to hear people who may be resistant. You need to hear them openly with curiosity, with compassion, just like I would treat a visitor. *(School 1)*

Other comments about respect and ombuds include:

> They have to know that regardless, I'm going to treat them with respect. And part of that respect is the confidentiality that has to go with it… I don't want people waiting on me because typically if they're calling me, they're in a crisis, they may be in a conflict, but in their mind, they're in a crisis. *(School 6)*
>
> The ego wants to be right. The heart wants to get along. *(School 7)*

As identified at the beginning of this chapter, only two of the participating ombuds shared a Healing and Psychology background. They both utilize various **Therapy** concepts in

their positions as ombuds. Of note, they were the only two ombuds to mention the utilization of therapy in any way. They shared the following thoughts:

> I wouldn't say that it blurs the line of coaching, but it is probably more of a therapeutic process and I'm sharing therapeutic concepts. *(School 7)*

> It's based on solution-focused therapy and motivational interviewing. *(School 10)*

Finally, two ombuds also felt it was worth discussing the **Continuous Self Development** required to be successful in the position. Ombuds as a field is still relatively new and growing. Conflict Resolution as a field is continuing to develop and grow as well. Ombuds with any level of experience need to maintain awareness and work towards improvement of self to more effectively support the improvement of others.

School 2 discussed their approach to professional development, stating:

> I'm always refreshing myself with some of the books I read in law school about like, how to win friends or how to negotiate, you know, Getting to Yes, all those kinds of books. *(School 2)*

School 7 discussed the importance of working with a visitor through the visitor's perspective. To do so, the ombuds need to broaden their lens to understand how to best communicate with the visitor. They shared their experience, saying:

> I'm pulling in from a variety of different knowledges. I might pull in from history, I might pull in from social sciences, I might pull in from anthropology, or I'll pull in from Eastern sciences or ancestral ancient sciences. So I'm going to pull in all kinds of different things from all kinds of different places. That speaks to that individual based on their worldview, their understanding of their conflict, and

what they're open to hearing. I'm not going to share a worldview perspective on conflict resolution if they can't even understand or fathom that worldview.

(School 7)

Theme 5: Success as a University Ombuds

This final theme will present information derived from interviews conducted with University Ombuds on the following critical aspects of how they define success and the requirements they feel are needed to be successful in the position. Topics to be covered include:

- Factors of Success
- Identifiable Requirements for University Ombuds

Factors of Success

The 10 participating University Ombuds were asked to define success within the framework of their positions at their academic institutes and four key indicators were *often* mentioned: **Referrals**, **Follow-Up Meetings**, **Direct Feedback**, and **Improved Visitor Outlook**. **Case Increase** was mentioned by three ombuds and that benchmark for success will also be explored in this section. A breakdown of the ombuds' responses to defining success is:

Table 14

Factors of Success

Key Indicators	Frequency	Magnitude
Improved Visitor Outlook	6	O
Referrals	6	O
Follow-up Meetings	5	O
Direct Feedback	5	O
Case Increase	3	R
Policy Changes	1	R

Improved Visitor Outlook was mentioned very *often* as a success indicator by interviewees. This refers to how visitors feel after working with the ombuds on any issues they share. This is a more subjective and qualitative indicator of success compared to the three subsequent success indicators, which can be measured quantitatively. This indicator is also a direct result of how well an ombuds approaches conflict management, one of the ombuds' four self-identified major responsibilities discussed in Theme 2. Key concepts previously discussed in other sections that are critical to this success indicator include empowerment, listening, and trust. Comments shared by ombuds regarding improved visitor outlooks as a key indicator of success include:

> Somebody will come with a big tangle of problems and challenges and difficulties, and I can't stress enough sort of the emotional dimension. People will cry. They will tell me the worst possible injustices they faced, their entire life will be in the balance in the sense of their career, their livelihood, all of these things. And to have somebody come with all of this and feel at the end of a conversation that they have more clarity about the options in front of them and in fact, may even know now what they want to do when they did not previously, that's a sign of success immediately in itself. *(School 8)*
>
> Even if they don't get what they want, they feel empowered to act in some fashion or want to come and develop a skill because they're not ready to talk to somebody they're in conflict with**.** ***(****School 1)*
>
> A lot of times people are fearful. Most of the time their fear is because they're not informed. So really helping them with that and kind of just making them feel, usually they're not happy at the university and that's okay**.** ***(****School 2)*

> I think those are the ways that I would measure success is that people feel like they're being heard and they're being helped. That's even with like, we see it on our evaluations where they'll say, "Well, ultimately they weren't able to help me in favor, like take my side right? But I felt heard and they put me in touch with the right resources". So I think those are the ways that I would look at successes in the office**.** ***(****School 4)*

> If the mediated conversation went well and people have gained a mutual understanding and respect for each other and ideas for working together better moving forward, that's a measure of success**.** ***(****School 5)*

> Do I define success as people being happier when they leave my office than when they come in? To me, that would be a cheap way to do it. When I talk to people like almost always, like almost 100% of the time, they're in a better mood when they leave. And they came in and a lot of that's because they were struggling with somebody. They told somebody something. We explored options. I helped to empower them. They'll feel better, which is good. So like at my bare minimum, that's my bare minimum for success. I'm not making people feel worse and they're feeling better. Okay. But to me, it's deeper than that because again, I could just do that. It's about changing the culture and making this a better place, helping small groups build their group expectations to make this a better place. That's success to me**.** ***(****School 9)*

Referrals were also mentioned very *often* as an indicator that the Ombuds viewed as a benchmark of success. Noting an increase in referrals could be a result of several effective lines of effort, including productive conflict resolution cases, positive experiences for visitors, fruitful

educational events, and successful outreach and awareness initiatives. Participants noted the value and importance of reputation numerous times through the interviews, including an effective means of raising awareness and trust building. Additionally, adhering to IOA standards and practices was a means of safeguarding the reputation of the Ombuds office at the schools. **School 7** effectively summarized their view of referrals, stating:

> The referrals from others expand every day. The referrals to present and do trainings expand because every time I do, they say, "Oh my gosh, I just went to this training because I knew it was yours. And I love hearing what you say and how you say it. And I just want more". Okay. So I'm doing something well there, right? And so my derivative of success is that there's still a growing desire to interact. There's still a growing desire to recommend or**.** ***(****School 7)*

Several schools noted **Trust** is a major aspect of garnishing referrals and that they take referrals as an indicator of the trust they have built with their visitors. Said two schools:

> I think it's those things like knowing people trust us to come back a second time or trust us enough to make a referral or bringing their friend in… I just had a graduate student today say my friend said I needed to come talk to you. ***School 4***
>
> They trust me enough to refer somebody else to me**.** ***(****School 6)*

School 4 touched not only on referrals with their previous quote but also on **Follow-up Meetings** as a measure of success. They also noted that successful initial meetings can lead to follow-up meetings related to different issues, supporting the Ombud's perception of successful interactions. Said another school about success leading to additional meetings:

> They know they've seen me and other people have had good experiences with all those kind of things where people then feel like they can come and talk to me. *(School 2)*

School 1 explained that follow-up meetings do not have to be focused on visitors only, but how successful engagements and partnerships can lead to building allies and opening windows of opportunity. When talking about success indicators, they stated:

> There's somebody I can go back to if I need a collaborator or a partner, somebody who I'm pretty much guaranteed they're going to hear me as opposed to being defensive about a concern. *(School 1)*

Research participants equally noted **Direct Feedback** as an indicator of success along with follow-up meetings. Direct feedback took many forms for the ombuds, including face-to-face remarks, emails, and other written-form means, and survey responses for those offices that provide follow-up comment opportunities and post-visit evaluations. Comments shared about feedback to ombuds included:

> Seeing the positive feedback from the evaluations…We do evaluations that we send out to visitors after they've met with us. It's short. It's like ten questions long, but it asks questions like, "Do you feel like the Ombuds respected your confidentiality? Do you feel like you were treated fairly? Do you feel like you were heard?" By and large, those come back as Yes, every time. So that is something that we watch pretty closely, to see if those numbers shift, we want to make sure that we're addressing that**.** ***(****School 4)*

> In the past, we've had surveys that clients fill out at the beginning and end of sessions which I think is simple but useful. Having a three-question Likert scale it was hard. It's been harder to do via Zoom than it was to do in person. Having little paper sheets was pretty easy in person, a little harder to do. So actually doing surveys and takeaways is a little bit more challenging. We're putting together a survey that will likely be sent to clients after meetings just a link if they want to fill it out to try to get some client or visitor feedback. *(School 10)*
>
> I look at it at the individual level with number one is testimony. I keep a binder, again anonymized, but it has sort of notes from people that when they say that they really benefited from working with us. *(School 8)*
>
> I have had people write back and say, "You don't know how much that meant. Like, I'm on the brink right now"… I also view the random email or stop-by thanking me or closing a loop as a success. *(School 1)*

Case Increase was *rarely* mentioned by many of the schools but bears exploration for a couple of reasons. For the schools that consider caseload as a success, it serves as a quantitative means to demonstrate the level of value they offer a university and can provide feedback regarding how their outreach initiatives are being received by their target audience. Two schools shared the following thoughts on case increase as a measure of success:

> The biggest way that we've really kind of charted success and engagement has been how many people are reaching out to us and how many situations are we working on. Which is the (approach), how many hamburgers sold? It's not how much people enjoyed the hamburger or how satisfying it was or how long it satisfied them until they needed to eat again. I think we've really tracked usage

> and had that as a barometer of the utility of the office. We're doing a lot. I think there's room for improvement for us in terms of showing the quality of the work that we're doing or the impact. ***(****School 10)*

> I think right now, specifically for (the University)'s Ombuds, it would be making people aware (we) exist and that I'm a resource for them. So every time I do one of those informational interviews or I relaunch the website or whatever, I get a couple of people coming. And so getting people aware that there's a space and then once they're aware of their space using it and feeling safe to use it, like building that trust with them to where they're coming**.** *(School 2****)***

However, growth in case work is not feasible for ombuds offices at all schools. The concept of being understaffed and under-resourced was mentioned numerous times by multiple ombuds throughout the interviews. Likely, schools that feel they are currently at or approaching maximum visitor capacity will view direct feedback as a greater indicator of success. To use the analogy by School 10, some ombuds may focus on the quality of their burgers versus the quantity of which they have served.

The difference in viewing increased casework as an indicator of success emphasizes the individuality of each ombuds office and how it is impossible to identify and apply blanket criteria to measure the effectiveness of an ombuds office at a school. This research indicates that there is no single means of measuring the success of an ombuds office at a given university and that any attempt to judge an ombuds office based on criteria that were not self-identified by the ombuds would be erroneous.

Identifiable Requirements for University Ombuds

Closely related to the previous question and as a follow-up to defining success as a University Ombuds, research participants were asked the following questions:

What are identifiable requirements for you to be successful at your job and what does it take for someone to be successful as a University Ombuds?

Table 15 is a breakout of the coded responses provided by the ombuds.

Table 15

Identifiable Requirements for Ombuds

Identifiable Requirements	Frequency	Magnitude
*Soft Skills**	10	A
Humility	5	O
Balance	3	R
Diverse perspective	3	R
Awareness of Environment	2	R
Experience prior to Ombuds	2	R
Generalist	1	R
Supported Training	1	R
Direct Line to the Top	1	R

Based on the data presented until this point, it should come as no surprise that **Soft Skills** are a universal requirement for ombuds to be successful in their position. The term itself refers to "people" skills; these are skills, personal attributes, and abilities that support one's effective interaction with other individuals (Danao, 2023 April 20). Although an argument can be made for Humility to be included as a soft skill, based on the responses provided by the interviewees it is more appropriate for it to be recognized separately as an identifiable requirement for University Ombuds success. Responses provided often listed several soft skills in the same

breath, increasing the code strength as they were provided as coupled or related; humility often stood alone or as an independent consideration.

The participants listed a range of soft skills that they identified as requirements for success. A breakdown of the skills, including frequency mentioned and magnitude, follows:

Table 16

Soft Skills

Soft Skills	Frequency	Magnitude
Listening	6	O
Empathetic	4	O
Communication	3	R
Patience and Perspective	2	R
Introspective	2	R
Principled	2	R
Collaborative	2	R
Critical Thinker	1	R

School 7 captured the essence of soft skills for ombuds when asked about identifiable requirements for success. They stated:

> And a lot of times it falls under these really basic constructs of human existence that have to do with being open to listening, having compassion, having empathy, having unconditional love or appreciation for others, you know, and putting your ego aside right when you put your ego to the side and focus on those other things, then you have the opportunity to achieve resolution. *(School 7)*

Listening is again emphasized by the interviewees as a major factor in their jobs. The skill was developed at length already, previously discussed as a Conflict Management

subcategory, one of the four major responsibilities identified in Theme 2. The quote from **School 7** above demonstrates the importance of not only soft skills but unambiguously highlighting listening as the premier skill the position requires. When discussing Listening as a key requirement for success, several ombuds additionally note:

> I think you have to be able to listen because I've already had people who come and all they really want to do is vocalize their problems. So you have to be comfortable just sitting in and taking it in and just sort of being there for them to talk through stuff. You have to be able to hold multiple perspectives in your head at once because we are impartial. So it's easy to take someone's side if they come to you first about something. But we really have to be able to, like, see the problem from a more systematic perspective. *(School 3)*

> Being open, being an active listener, and trying not to be as nonjudgmental, trying to be non-judgmental, not have your opinions come to the forefront, unconscious bias, anything like that. *(School 2)*

> Have to be a good listener. A good, active listener. You have to be a strong communicator. I think it helps to be a person who is able to speak with clarity and think through things with clarity. We talk about reframing earlier, to be able to frame or reframe an issue to help a visitor. Look at it from different vantage points. Those are all skills that can be sort of developed. *(School 8)*

Being a good listener is one of the key components to success as a University Ombuds, but not the only requirement. Suspending judgment, being able to view an issue through multiple lenses, and having the ability to communicate clearly are also important and related. An ombuds needs to take notice of not only what a visitor is saying, but also what they may not be saying

and considering. Doing so allows an ombuds to ask more effective and thought-provoking questions that could help empower a visitor to work through their issues. **School 2** touched on this concept when they said:

> I use a lot of those skills, those communication skills and those kinds of reading people and reading the room and kind of an issue**.** ***(School 2)***

Another identified skill required to be successful as a University Ombuds was empathy. Empathy can mean many things to different people, but in this context, the definition of empathy provided by the Cambridge Dictionary is most appropriate: *the ability to share someone else's feelings or experiences by imagining what it would be like to be in that person's situation* (2024). It is important to remember that empathy does not equate to agreeing with the visitor as an ombuds should listen and remain objective, trying to understand the totality of the situation to provide the most effective support. Below are several comments shared by respondents that spoke about empathy:

> Everyone's going to be different. Basically, I find treating people with a measure of kindness, empathy, and respect tends to go a long way**.** ***(School 9)***

> Just somebody interested in helping other people and communicate better and also helping people be more engaged and just working through their (issues). I have a just tremendous amount of empathy for folks who are having a hard time… you have to be empathetic and fair**.** ***(School 5)***

> You've got to have empathy. You've got to have patience, and you've got to be able to shut your mouth and let people go. And then know when to interject and to keep them going, you know, positive encouragers. ***(School 6)***

School 9 bridged the importance of listening and other soft skills with the second-most commonly identified requirement, **Humility**, when they discussed requirements for success.

> I think, number one, listening. Huge. Number two, patience. Number three, you need a total lack of ego because people I mean, you're dealing with very, very intelligent and accomplished people. You're dealing with people who may think they're very intelligent and accomplished, but in any case, you've got to really be willing to concede that you're not going to know everything. And again, this boggles my mind. It's basically like a small city and just finding out what everybody does. So it's kind of amazing. Like I feel like I could be in this job for 100 years and still not learn everything… I guess the important thing is that you need a lot of humility to be in the shop because you're going to be challenged every day, whether it's emotionally, intellectually, you know, procedurally, there's going to be challenges every day**.** ***(****School 9)*

School 8 also shared insightful thoughts related to humility as a requirement for success, stating:

> There might be a time where I think someone should speak up because of an injustice. Or there might be a time when I think they should take A, B, C, or D. Actually, deep down, I do have an opinion as to what I would do in their shoes, but that's not what I'm here to articulate. I'm here to serve them so that they can discover their own agency. So I think it's a matter of maintaining the right balance between your thoughts and your own agency versus that of the visitor. And the visitor is much more important because they're the one who owns the problem, not me. And so I don't know if that's really humility…. And maybe it comes down

> to humility, but it's the capacity to lean into, to live into the demands of the role while being able to bracket or. (*School 8)*

Two additional comments made by the University Ombuds when considering requirements for success in the position, which were echoed to various degrees amongst the respondents, include:

> I think one of the things that Ombuds need to do is to be aware that they are in a role that has a lot of risk and reward. As an independent office and an office that's often called into question by leadership and administration around the decisions that they're making. You need to kind of be able to be willing to put your job on the line**.** ***(****School 4)*

> I think what's really important is to have worked in a whole bunch of different roles and to have a real generalist mentality because I feel like without that if you come in with a very focused expertise and experience that actually you have a limited perspective and it's going to be hard for you to sit with, empathize, and understand the perspectives of the thousands of people that you're going to interact with. I think it's figuring out how you can be as available intellectually as possible for the people that you're meeting with so that you can understand their issues. And then balancing that with subject matter expertise so that it's not just listening, but you are adding a real value and they are looking at their situation differently after having spoken with you. And so that is hard to do. I think it's a really hard job. I think it comes easier for some folks than others. But the other piece is I think you need a lot of institutional knowledge and that's hard earned. I think it's hard for people who haven't been within an institution very long to

understand how to help people navigate that institution. So those are the things that kind of jump out to me. *(School 10)*

Summary and Conclusion

This chapter presented the research data derived from interviewing 10 University Ombuds about how they approach their positions as agents of change. Through the application of 1st and 2nd order coding, themes were developed to bin the information in an organized manner; magnitude coding was also used to emphasize the gravity of responses, which highlighted frequencies, similarities, and differences between the participants' answers. Additionally, specific research questions were highlighted throughout the chapter and themes to emphasize the codes' relevance to the stated purpose of the paper. This chapter presented quotes and thoughts provided by University Ombuds relevant to the research questions to best capture their experiences in the position.

The next and final chapter includes data analysis of the themes to answer the research questions. It will also revisit some of the theories presented in Chapter 2 and their applicability to University Ombuds as agents of change. This chapter will also address ombuds' approaches to populations within their organization. Finally, the chapter will explore the research limitations of this study and provide recommendations for both applications of the research to the field and University Ombuds as well as suggest future research considerations.

Chapter 5: Analysis and Conclusion

The final chapter of this paper presents analytical findings focused on answering the stated research questions from Chapter 1. Following the analysis and interpretation of the data to answer the research questions, the theoretical frameworks presented in Chapter 2 will be reviewed through the lens of ombuds to explore their respective applicability to the position and how University Ombuds approach their role as change agents. This chapter will also present study limitations as well as recommendations for potential future research. Chapter 5 concludes by providing recommendations and final thoughts.

Analysis & Interpretation of Findings

Before going in-depth into the analysis, it is worth revisiting the research sampling outlined in Chapter 3 which identified purposeful sampling with a snowball approach to data collection. The stated goal was to conduct between 8-15 interviews, based largely on similar qualitative studies of this nature and with the expectation that more interviews conducted would provide enough data to highlight commonalities between interview responses to answer the research questions. The data collection phase ended with 10 participants from universities spread across the country, meeting the stated requirement of interviews. However, the snowball approach to finding participants yielded no results as many of the participants stated they did not know their peers and counterparts at other schools. Instead, emails were sent out to a random sampling of ombuds from a variety of universities in waves of 10 schools at a time, to continue until the desired total of interviews was reached. Close to 40 schools were contacted in four waves, yielding 10 completely unrelated participants.

Because of the described robust data collected, it is with high confidence that the research questions can be addressed accurately to capture the University Ombuds experience related to

the research questions. Though no two respondents provided identical answers, family resemblance analysis (introduced in Chapter 3) highlighted consistencies between the respondents which were presented through magnitude coding in the previous chapter.

The focus of this research is University Ombuds as change agents within their institutions. Through analysis and data interpretation, this section addresses three specific questions to provide a detailed and holistic understanding of the approach University Ombuds take to their positions to enact change. The three addressals include:

Addressal 1: How do University Ombuds approach change agency within their institution?

Addressal 2: What specific actions do Ombuds take to promote change within their institutions?

Addressal 3: How do University Ombuds approach sub-organizations when attempting to drive change within their institution?

As indicated in Chapter 1, the difference between the first and second addressals is primarily the focus of ombuds acting as change agents. The former addressal discusses the source of power or authority from which ombuds derive their ability to act as agents of change and should be considered more “big picture” change agency. The latter addressal focuses on tangible actions an ombuds take to promote change within their institution and is more granular in detail. The final addressal discusses how sub-organizations influence an ombuds’ approach to change at various levels within the university.

Addressal 1: How do University Ombuds approach change agency within their institution?

As noted in the Chapter 2 Literature Review, Ombuds do not wield formal authority. However, they lean heavily on their soft power as the primary means to serve as agents of change within their institutions. Analysis of the data presented in the previous section strongly indicates that they derive their soft power from two primary sources: *Positional Reporting* and *Trust Building*.

Positional Reporting includes both the Ombuds' chain of command and their mechanisms of reporting. In the previous section, Positional Reporting had the highest frequency of responses and was identified by most of the ombuds as their main source of soft power. Direct access to top university decision-makers strategically places the Ombuds as both a trusted confidant of the institution's leadership and someone others view as authoritative by proximity to the president, provost, or other upper leaders. Although no ombuds discussed directly invoking University leadership when pushing for potential change or managing conflict, it is implied when ombuds introduce themselves and the position to leaders and community members across the school. As part of their introductions, ombuds discuss the scope of their position, the standards of practice to which they are beholden, and to whom they report. Having others understand the Ombuds' chain of command also helps promote change and address concerns at a lower level; it is unlikely that college and campus leaders want grievances about them brought up to higher levels where the consequences can be tangible and possibly severe. Additionally, Ombuds prefer to address issues at the lowest level, closest to the source of conflict. As mentioned by Ombuds, they often have limited time and bandwidth to highlight trends and concerns to University leadership; if ombuds can manage the issue without elevating it to their supervisor, they will have more time to highlight larger trends or concerns. Positional reporting is analogous to

President Theodore Roosevelt's Big Stick ideology where he said "Speak softly and carry a big stick". Ombuds do not carry any sticks, but community members recognize that the people ombuds report to do carry them so there could be repercussions to not listening to or working with ombuds.

Trust Building is the second source of an ombuds' soft power and encompasses an ombuds' personality, professional relationships, standards of practice, and the accuracy of information they provide others. Although personality was mentioned more frequently as a factor for building trust with people, the totality of information presented in the previous section indicates that holistic and total trust requires all four of the aforementioned aspects. Personality does not refer to simply being a good person; Ombuds detailed that authenticity, empathy, the willingness to listen, the desire to selflessly serve their community, and maintaining awareness of the institute's climate were all foundational aspects of a University Ombuds personality.

Professional relationships are highly dependent on the other aspects of trust building and encompass the interconnectivity between the four building blocks of trust for University Ombuds. Ombuds cannot propagate change alone and they are dependent on those in formal leadership positions to enact the change they feel is needed. Having positive relationships with not only an ombuds' direct supervisor or campus president, but also across the colleges, departments, and organizations within the university's purview allows the ombuds to serve as a silent partner in creating change. Humility was an important aspect of being an ombuds, as identified by the research participants; one of the greatest needs for humility as an ombuds is for them to stoke the flames of change without seeking or taking credit for their role and contribution to the outcome.

An ombuds' Standards of Practice, as outlined by IOA, provides a tangible road map and boundaries to which an ombuds is held accountable. Whereas personality (as a factor of trust building) refers greatly to the man or woman that fills the position of ombuds, the standards are focused primarily on the role and not the member assuming the role. They are uniform and set the bar for anyone taking on the title and responsibilities of ombuds. This aspect places the onus on trusting the position versus the person; people come and go, but the position of ombuds stays constant, as do the standards by which they practice.

Consistency in production is the fourth and final cornerstone to building trust for ombuds. A leader cannot trust someone who provides inaccurate information which is relied upon for action. An ombuds cannot serve as an agent of change if nobody is willing to listen to them because they lost the faith and trust of others based on inaccurate information. It was articulated by at least one participant that university ombuds must ensure the accuracy and relevance of the information they are sharing otherwise they lose the trust of their allies and change partners. Consistency in production is the output of an ombuds' trend analysis. An ombuds' trend analysis goes beyond one or two visitors and is closely related to understanding the landscape and atmosphere of the campus or institution, identifying what are critical data points, and depending on the issue or trend providing university leaders with potential suggestions or courses of action. This is how ombuds act as change agents through the lens of trend analysis, which again requires a degree of trust in the ombuds and in the analysis and production they provide.

Addressal 2: What specific actions do Ombuds take to promote change within their institutions?

There is no single approach ombuds take to promoting change within their organizations. Instead (and to borrow another word of Swedish origin), ombuds take a smorgasbord approach to

change agency based on the scope of the change and what they deem necessary to promote the desired end state. Their approach to change is closely related to their approach to conflict management and resolution. This should be considered a natural observation as conflict resolution is in of itself the result of behavioral change between multiple parties to address a clash of views, opinions, and subsequent actions. Ombuds approach conflict from a lens of change- for a resolution to be reached, change needs to occur on at least one of the conflicting sides. The challenge for ombuds is helping the parties reach the change needed for the desired outcome and resolution. This is true for all conflicts, from interpersonal to institutional, and conflicts stemming from policy.

To that end, Ombuds utilize a variety of tools and actions to enact change at any level within their university. These tools and actions include utilizing a variety of soft skills; helping visitors, conducting training, providing feedback and reporting; and engaging in collaborative partnerships.

Soft skills were mentioned several times in the previous chapter by the University Ombuds, including as an identifiable requirement highlighted in one form or another by all 10 research participants. Of the suite of soft skills presented previously, Listening, Empathy, and Communication were the three most frequently discussed. Listening was the most critical soft skill as not only an identifiable requirement for ombuds to be successful but it was also identified as a major responsibility for University Ombuds. Listening was highlighted by several participants as the most important aspect of their jobs and to enable them to act as change agents. The participating ombuds described the need and utilization specifically of active listening, allowing visitors to feel heard and understood while assuring the ombuds that they understand the message that is being communicated. It would be impossible for ombuds to identify trends

and the need for change if they do not understand the actual problem or concern. A lack of understanding of the true issue would lead to inaccurate trend identification and analysis on the part of the ombuds which in turn would lead to inaccurate information being presented to university leadership. The result would be decreased trust in the ombuds by top echelon leaders, fracturing a source of an ombuds' soft power (as discussed in the previous addressal).

Helping visitors, conducting training, and providing feedback are some of the most prevalent uses of a University Ombuds time and each serves as a conduit to promote change within their institutions. Helping visitors allows the ombuds to promote conflict resolution and is also the predominant means of data collection for the ombuds to identify trends and conduct analysis. Additionally, it serves as a means to strengthen the ombuds office's reputation on campus, building trust with individuals, groups, or larger organizations depending on the scope of conflicts they help address. Providing training not only serves as a means to improve conflict resolution skills for individuals or small groups but it also allows the ombuds to address trends they have identified at lower levels and promote positive change behaviors to tackle trends or broader issues they have identified. An example where training could support behavior change based on trend analysis is when *School 2* highlighted a lack of effective communication in the post-COVID era between departments, faculty, and individuals which resulted in conflict. School 2 ombuds has identified, based on helping visitors, a trend of poor communication across campus; they could offer training opportunities to the university community focused on improving communication to promote change based on an identified negative trend. They can also share their trend analysis with university leaders at all levels; bringing awareness of an identified trend to the attention of those with formal authority goes a long way in addressing the concern and promoting positive change. There will be some instances where an ombuds is asked

to suggest courses of action, which greatly empowers them to serve as change agents because it would be the ombuds' plan that would be implemented.

Partnership Engagement is the final aspect of change agency this addressal explores. The value of partnership was discussed as an important aspect of trust and a source of soft power for ombuds. It equally bears consideration as a means by which ombuds promote change within their university. Identifying and recruiting key allies to help spread and encourage positive change is critical for ombuds as they can reach a broader audience and quicken the acceptance and implementation of change to address trends or concerns. Strategic partnerships also lend more credibility to the ombuds as it shows they have the trust and support of other key figures and organizations across a campus or institution. Building on their reputation through collaborative partnerships or strategic alliances opens the aperture for trust and acceptance from people who may not have worked with the Ombuds before, providing the ombuds with greater influence and effect for the change agency.

Addressal 3: How do University Ombuds approach sub-organizations when attempting to drive change within their institution?

Based on the data presented in the previous chapter, it is clear that scope certainly influences how ombuds approach both change and conflict resolution. University Ombuds approach groups differently when attempting to drive change, depending on the category (person, organization, or level of leadership). Although University Ombuds provide the same base services to all populations, the vast majority of ombuds cater their approaches to support based on whom they are interacting with. This is also true of their approach to promoting change when working with and across various populations. Analysis of a social system is used to recognize patterns and similarities between macro, meso, and micro levels of a non-linear

system. For this study, a University's levels of leadership and the subsystems' span of authority from the top to the student level were categorized as different populations or groups.

University ombuds rely on their soft power to enact change regardless of the sub-organization. However, different groups are motivated by different aspects of an ombuds soft power. For faculty and staff, positional reporting is a major factor. Several ombuds noted that their direct line to university leadership opens doors and opportunities for them and that university employees are aware of the ombuds lines of communication. For faculty and staff, trust is a secondary driver of an ombuds' soft power whereas for students trust is the primary source of an ombuds' soft power. The ombuds that participated in this research all shared an understanding of where their soft power originated based on the sub-organization.

The real difference in approach to populations stems from the needs each level or group seemingly has. Although no two visitors are the same, students tend to come to ombuds with questions and situations that are more straightforward, e.g. grade disputes, claims of favoritism, and financial aid issues. These types of issues take less time for an ombuds to gain an understanding and develop a plan to work with the visitor. Students also view the ombuds as an authoritative figure, despite the very intentional lack of formal authority. If an ombuds pushes for change, they are generally met with less resistance from students than other populations based on their perceived authority.

As you ascend the organizational ladder of a university, problems become more complex and require more time and nuance by the ombuds to provide the same level of support that they provide to students. These problems can range from financial and budgetary to feelings of disrespect and issues with authority between a sub-organization's managers, peers, or subordinates; inter-organizational concerns are also brought to the ombuds by higher-level sub-

organizations. As noted in the previous section, the faculty population was identified by ombuds as the most difficult or complicated to work with. Part of that difficulty stems from a larger degree of pride faculty show than other categories, ownership of their careers, situations, and subject matter expertise. These challenges carry over into an ombuds role as a change agent and promote alternative or new courses of action to address concerning trends. Because faculty view the primary origin of an ombuds soft power as being derived from positional reporting, they may lack the trust in the ombuds that the ombuds is trying to help the university community, or they may be hesitant to listen to recommendations that come from an outside entity or department from their college or leadership chain.

Regardless of population or difficulty, ombuds do not shy away from providing equitable support to all visitors and providing change agency to all sub-organizations.

Theoretical Implications

Three theoretical frameworks were introduced at the beginning of this research to amplify understanding and explain possible trends and patterns identified through the data research, presentation, and analysis. This section reviews those theories through the lens of university ombuds as agents of change and is limited in scope to what has thus far been presented in the introduction and literature review. The three theories that are being applied are Systems, Change, and Organizational Culture theory.

Theory 1: Systems Theory

As defined by Meadows, a system is a set of interconnected elements that produce a specific outcome (Meadows, 2008, p.12). There are three basic entities in a system: elements, the interconnectivity between the elements, and a function. Systems can be open, closed, or isolated. Social learning is a significant factor in changing a social system. A social system has a set of

norms that act as default values that influence how elements within a system behave. A system has a degree of elasticity, which refers to how it maintains its integrity during a period of change or responding to disturbances. Systems are organized into hierarchies where the well-being of lower systems is the primary focus. Feedback loops enforce or propagate systemic behaviors.

A university is an open system comprised of many subsystems that can function independently but are required to interact with each other to various degrees. The function of a university system is many-fold depending on which perspective it is viewed from, but broadly speaking it is primarily a system to promote education, research, and learning. Elements within the university social system include all employees and students, university partners and stakeholders, and anyone with a vested interest in the success of the institute.

University ombuds hold a very unique position within the university system. They can be considered an independent system in itself, but they can also be viewed as an element. Unlike many other subsystems, ombuds require interaction with other systems and elements to function and produce outputs relevant to the larger university system in which they find themselves. Within the university social system, ombuds have several functions: they provide input to other systems to reach a desired state, they function as feedback loops to other systems, and they provide social learning to elements and subsystems within the university. These functions support the ombuds' ability to serve as change agents within the university system.

Input is usually sought after by visitors, leaders, or other elements who are looking for assistance to drive a behavior change. Input cannot be mandated as anyone who works with an ombuds needs to do so voluntarily; change in behavior has to be requested and not forced to ensure it lasts. Whether an ombuds is providing insight and guidance to address an interpersonal conflict or to promote larger, sweeping changes in policy or systemic procedures within the

university, from a systems theory model they act as change agents by providing input to an element or sub-system with the hope and expectation of creating a new and preferred behavior.

Where input is reactionary, feedback from an ombuds can be very proactive when the university ombuds attempts to head off potential issues or conflicts within the system of the university. The direct line of communication between the ombuds and top university leaders allows for honest feedback to the university brass that they might not otherwise receive. Ombuds have no ulterior motives or competing interests that would skew their feedback to favor a specific outcome. It is human nature to have thoughts, opinions, or feelings about issues, but the research conducted indicates that ombuds are conscientious about biases and they do what they can to remove their hubris from any interactions with visitors, partners, and campus leaders to provide objective perspectives and suggestions. Having the trust of institutional leaders to provide such insight and feedback is what situates ombuds in a unique position within the university social system to drive or promote change at a large-scale level.

Change does not materialize without social learning. As indicated by the interview participants, most of them carry a training and teaching responsibility. This provides ombuds an opportunity to directly influence social learning to improve behaviors, many times conflict behaviors, to improve the organizational culture of the university system. Successful training programs can alter the behaviors of the majority and bring about positive, lasting change. A strong training program can also increase the elasticity of a system as it can prepare its elements and sub-systems to manage exterior forces and inputs more productively while strengthening the system's core norms and behaviors. Providing conflict resolution training to individuals and groups within the university system is a proven path ombuds take to promote change and increase resiliency within the system they serve.

Based on the data, policy changes are not as frequent as other forms of change, yet they are achievable. One ombuds shared that policy changes are not a weekly occurrence but that they are changes that ombuds remember. They specified two instances of successful policy changes that started with visitors and data collection, conducted trend analysis to determine how far-reaching this concern was, and then researched actual policy versus procedures before communicating to the appropriate authorities their findings. In both instances, systemic policy changes were reached by either creating or revising university policy based largely on the ombud's input and recommendations.

Theory 2: Change Theory

There are many different models and frameworks to explain both process-based and people-focused change. Change theory focuses on explaining how systems and people can transition from old behaviors to new, desired ones. Understanding Change Theory provides agents with a variety of options to promote change efforts within their organizations, identify pitfalls and resistance points, and recognize the necessary steps required to achieve lasting change.

Force-field analysis is a change theory framework that claims lasting change is reached only when change-driving forces outweigh restricting forces, shifting the quasi-stationary equilibrium (behavioral norms) to a new state. One three-stage model of Change Theory developed by Lewin is referred to as the Freeze Process, which states that awareness of needed change unfreezes current norms, modeling and teaching new desired behaviors promotes the elements of a system to adopt the change, before finally freezing the new behavior in the system’s norms and culture.

Kotter outlined an 8-stage change process based largely on the writings of Lewin, where he outlined three phases of change and eight steps within the phases to achieve lasting change. Phase 1 included establishing a sense of urgency, forming powerful coalitions, and creating a change vision. Phase 2 outlined communicating the change vision, empowering others to implement the vision, and creating short-term wins through defining milestones. The final phase focused on propagating the desired change through leveraging credibility to attract support and institutionalizing (or freezing to borrow from Lewin) the change.

The Cycle of Change is a theory where the authors, Prochaska and DiClemente, proposed that only about 20% of any change remains and that change is a cyclical endeavor where the more it is attempted the higher the odds are of it succeeding. They identified six stages of change; these also nest well with both Lewin and Kotter. The first stage is pre-contemplation, which is equivalent to the quasi-stable equilibrium or the standing norms of the system. Driving forces of change can eventually push the organization into the second stage, contemplation, which makes the system aware of a need or desire for change. The third and fourth stages are preparation and call to action where systems identify the new desired behaviors and work towards enacting the desired change. The fifth stage is maintenance, where a system will attempt to freeze the new behaviors into the societal norms and values. Finally, relapse is the sixth stage, where the system is likely to revert to the original state before attempting change again but by learning from what was successful and what challenges it faced the system should take a different course of action.

The change theories proposed by Lewin, Kotter, and Prochaska & DiClemente can all be applied to university ombuds and explain in various degrees how they approach change agency. As discussed in systems theory, ombuds provide input and feedback to elements within the

academic system. The data points ombuds provide can serve as change-driving forces that attempt to shift the established quasi-stationary equilibrium to more advantageous and desired norms and behaviors. The element receiving the data can implement the actual change and an ombuds need to recognize what the expected influence is of the various receivers of their input and feedback; the higher up the system's hierarchy the broader and more sweeping change can be. However, an ombuds cannot always run to the university president with every idea or inkling of change as building support and empowering change at the lowest levels will be more effective at achieving lasting change. Advancing the Force Field theory to Lewin's Freeze model, the University Ombuds can be a driving force in the first stage of change, promoting awareness of the need for change. Ombuds also has agency in executing the second phase, unfreezing the norms and behavior, through modeling what successful change behavior encompasses and providing social learning to relevant elements (the value of such learning was highlighted in systems theory).

University Ombuds can use Kotter's more detailed change process as a road map or guide to serve as a change agent, especially for policy changes and other broader changes that are best codified. Although the ombuds can drive much of Phase 1 and some of Phase 2 alone, they discussed the value of strategic partnerships across organizations and systems within the university. Ombuds can identify change needs based on trend analysis and data collection and begin communicating the relative sense of urgency with university leaders. Simultaneously, they can identify other elements and actors that they can form coalitions with to promote change. These coalitions can be based on a shared vision of the need for change, or self-serving for each individual element involved based on their needs. Together with their partners, the coalition should collaborate to create a shared change vision. An ombuds needs to find strategic partners

that they think can help drive the change because, after the first phase, ombuds will be less hands-on in the process due to maintaining their stance of neutrality and impartiality. This was exemplified by the ombuds in interviews when they explained that they could serve on boards or working groups as non-voting members. Ombuds can support the coalition in Phase 2 by being a secondary or tertiary voice in communicating the change vision, but they should not come off as the driving force based on their execution of IOA standards. Ombuds can coach members of the coalition on how to approach the empowerment of others for the implementation of the change vision. Ombuds spoke at length about empowering others to find solutions; that same approach is relevant in step 5 of Kott's model; it can sometimes be difficult for leaders to empower others to execute a vision without micromanaging or simply doing it themselves. Empowering others is a skill that can be learned and ombuds are in a prime position to support the change coalition through education and training. Kott's final phase requires leveraging credibility to attract support; ombuds have to be cautious not to risk their reputation to promote change that would be considered detrimental to any elements of the system as they cannot be viewed as choosing a side. Although ombuds could leverage their goodwill and the trust they have built across the university, it is wiser for them to support the coalition through education and raising awareness of the need for change.

Ombuds also have a role to play as change agents in the six-stage Change Cycle outlined by Prochaska and DiClemente. Many research participants discussed the need and value of being aware of the environment (or system) in which they function. Understanding the quasi-stable equilibrium of the system (Stage 1) allows the ombuds to recognize a need for change and to shift the organization into the second stage, change contemplation, making decision-makers and key stakeholders aware of the need for change. After bringing awareness to the forefront of

partners, leaders, and change-driving enablers, University Ombuds will again step back into a predominantly supportive role. With no formal authority, it is inappropriate for ombuds to personally enact change as the change should be a desired end state by those with formal authority. However, ombuds can again take on a more prominent role in the maintenance stage of the Change Cycle (Stage 5) by providing social learning to enforce the change state and aid in the freezing of new social norms.

The theoretical frameworks of change discussed in this section share many similarities. No single theory should be applied in an isolated context and a broader view of Change theory will yield more details of the abilities and limitations of ombuds as change agents. As School 8 noted, ombuds should also consistently ask themselves if they should promote or drive change, or if the scope of their responsibilities is limited to providing data through inputs and feedback loops to authoritative elements of the system. Though arguments can be made in favor of either position, it is important to understand that regardless of one's position, Ombuds do play a role in promoting change at various stages of the process based on the theoretical frameworks applied within the context of this research.

Theory 3: Organizational Culture Theory

Utilizing change theory is only successful if it can alter the cultural fabric of a system, which should be considered the framework of the organization. To improve an organization's culture is to change the difficult and undesired behaviors within it (Cloke & Goldsmith, 2011, p.226). The organizational culture of a system influences elemental behaviors and equates to the quasi-steady equilibrium from change theory. Conflict arises within an organization when elements do not conform to the established culture. Understanding an organization's culture supports identifying systems, subcultures, and the context that drives organizational conflict

(Cloke & Goldsmith, 2011, p.124). Additionally, awareness of key mechanisms within a system or organization allows change agents to methodically promote change behaviors.

Organizational culture provides elements with an identity, generates support for its function, and establishes acceptable behaviors and norms (Greenberg, 2010, p.342). Establishing trust to discuss and self-reflect on the organizational culture is one major approach to changing an organization's culture. An organization with high conflict resilience and intelligence is concentrated on paradoxical problem solving where leaders focus on potential versus traditional perspectives of conflict. When an organization or system bases its perspective on potential, they are more open to constructive problem solving, accepting diverse perspectives and ideas, and focused on what an organization can achieve and not what its limitations are.

Although University Ombuds should not be considered the driver of change for an organization's culture, they can be considered a catalyst for organizational culture change on both larger and smaller scales. Communicating observations and trend analysis to university leaders provides them with a better understanding of the organization's current culture and climate. Multiple research participants noted the importance for University Ombuds to have their finger on the pulse of the organization to provide university leaders with a holistic perspective of the University culture and happenings. This understanding equips leaders and higher-echelon elements to formalize and implement potential policy changes that align with the desired organizational culture to either promote organizational culture change or freeze the quasi-steady equilibrium of the culture in the desired state. This is a top-down approach with the desired change trickling to the subsystems.

From a smaller scale, working with and providing social learning experiences to visitors, individuals, and groups allows the ombuds to promote constructive conflict behaviors more

aligned with the desired organizational culture and curtail undesired and reactionary behaviors. From a systems perspective, in this manner, ombuds serve the lowest subsystems in the hierarchy and support change from the bottom upwards. By promoting change at the lower-echelon elemental levels, it is also possible to shift the quasi-steady equilibrium described previously.

Empowerment was highlighted by most ombuds as a key factor in their philosophy and approach to their positions. As defined in the previous section, empowerment entails providing guidance and assistance but allows visitors to solve their own problems. To encourage a change in the organizational culture of the university, the guidance and training an ombuds provides should lean heavily into the concepts of paradoxical problem-solving. Looking for positives, accepting diversity, and seeking different viewpoints all lead to more constructive solutions and promote a positive organizational culture based on acceptance and creativity.

Limitations of the Study

There were several limitations to this study that can be addressed. None of them should detract from the research and analysis presented but could be taken into consideration for any follow-up research endeavors. These limitations include *Research Samplings*, *Participants' Time Limitations,* and *Lack of Previous Studies on the Topic*.

Research Sampling

This study was planned to focus on universities and colleges from across the United States that met certain criteria related to the length of time the ombuds have been in position, ombuds had to be full-time employment, and that the university was a 4-year institution. While those criteria were met and seemed broad enough to allow for meaningful sampling, reviewing the data of participating ombuds highlights certain limitations.

The first limitation is that of all of the participating ombuds, only three of them support a university that has less than 20,000 students and the smallest school had 6,000+ students. As discussed in the previous chapter, schools are considered small if they have less than 3,000 students; this study did not include any small schools. Without inclusion in the study, it is impossible to definitively know if the ombuds experience as change agents is different at smaller schools versus medium and larger schools.

Additionally, only two of the ombuds that participated in the research support private schools whereas eight work at public schools. Based on a 2021 article by US News, the number of public and private schools is nearly identical at around 1,600 in the United States. This ratio is not reflected in the research's participants.

Furthermore, no Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) or other minority-focused academic institutions were included in this study. This was not by design as the schools were randomly sampled from across the country and the participants were the first 10 to respond to the interview request. It still does raise the question of how different the results might be if the focus of the study had been HBCUs and other minority-focused colleges.

To avoid this limitation in future research, more specific purposeful sampling would be appropriate to include smaller schools, an even divide between public and private universities, and additional efforts to include schools that serve predominantly minority populations.

Participants' Time Limitations

It was more challenging than expected to reach the target number of participants for the study. As discussed, the response rate was around 25% and it was that high largely due to the limited time requirement needed for the interview. Several of the ombuds noted before or during the interview that they could not go past 60 minutes and the initial interviews scheduled proved

difficult. The idea of follow-up interviews or extending past 60 minutes would have added to the challenge of reaching the 8-15 participant quota established in the methodology chapter of this research. This is a likely byproduct of ombuds already being overstretched and undermanned, especially when the University Ombuds office consists of a single man or woman and perhaps a graduate assistant.

Each ombuds was asked the same questions but they naturally gravitated to providing more or less information based on their interests and experiences. If one ombuds felt strongly about trend analysis and was less experienced about training, the answers they provided were skewed to their interests or passions. While detailed insights are of great value, each of the major themes and topics must be given equal interest and value to provide a holistic perspective of the entire ombuds' problem set and approach to change agency.

There were also a couple of instances where some questions may have been shortened to meet the time constraint. If a research participant spent an extended period answering the first questions, it left less time for the later questions. At times it proved a challenge to move the conversation along because it was clear the participant wanted to speak in-depth about something they deemed important and it was not worth the risk of potentially insulting them or turning them off to move the conversation along just to provide the same amount of time for each question. This was especially true in the first interviews before a baseline or expectations of answers were established.

An hour was ample time to ask the interview questions and have a rich conversation about ombuds as change agents, but future researchers would likely benefit from initially asking for either a 90-minute session or two 60-minute sessions. A second session would allow for contemplation and follow-on questioning about specific answers the ombuds provided in the first

interview session. This would especially be helpful for any clarification issues regarding answers the provided.

Lack of Previous Studies on the Topic

For several of the participants, the idea of acting as a change agent in their position as University Ombuds was a new concept. Nobody disagreed with that notion or concept, only that without formal authority they view themselves as more support elements to change agents. Despite ombuds continuing to be a growing field, there is already a lot of information published about the roles and responsibilities. The vast majority of that information focuses on organizational ombuds or even ombuds with legal backgrounds and there is a noticeable gap in published information about university ombuds specifically. University Ombuds find themselves in an interesting landscape as the majority of their visitors, or at least the population they serve, are only starting to come into adulthood; this is in stark contrast to most organizational ombuds whose service population has likely reached their early 20s (or older). University Ombuds therefore find themselves in a unique position with limited resources to read focused on their populations.

However, new research is published every year on ombuds. Future researchers should scour the internet and printed media for new research and information about the topics of Ombuds, University Ombuds, and qualitative analysis of social hierarchy to get a better understanding of the topic before the endeavor into lengthy research projects. The current information was helpful but was considered limited in scope and quantity.

Suggestions for Future Research

In addition to the solutions offered to mitigate each of the three identified limitations of the study, several additional paths of follow-on research are both relevant and potentially beneficial to understanding university ombuds as agents of change. The research presented in this paper focuses on the University Ombuds's perception of themselves, their roles and responsibilities, and how successful they are at approaching change agency at their institution. Gaining additional perspectives from University Ombuds stakeholders would open the aperture of understanding what others think of the ombuds' role and responsibilities and whether they are successful in acting as change agents. The list of University Ombuds stakeholders includes top university leaders and whomever they directly report to, other university leaders at middle and lower echelons, and visitors who work with the ombuds. Perspectives can be garnered from anyone who interacts with the ombuds on at least a somewhat consistent basis from all university groups: leaders, faculty, staff, and students. Comparing the perspectives of the ombuds provided in this research with the perspectives of those they serve and answer to would highlight congruencies and potential deficiencies in the expectations of how successful an ombuds is at their job.

As ombuds is still a position growing on college campuses in the United States, it would be interesting to investigate how schools without ombuds manage the ombuds' responsibilities and compare their levels of success versus schools with ombuds. As summarized in this research, a major responsibility of ombuds share is trend identification and analysis. Ombuds can promote change based on their findings and perspective but without an ombuds, how do universities approach trend identification regarding conflict, policy, and procedure? Based on the findings,

research along this line could expedite the further growth of ombuds on university campuses by showing the value ombuds bring to the organization and its social evolution.

As mentioned in the research limitations, this paper included primarily medium to large 4-year institutions with traditional student populations. Additional study topics could include researching community colleges and their utilization of ombuds, as well as smaller 4-year universities. Does an ombuds have more or less influence as an agent of change in a smaller setting, with a more limited population to serve? Additionally, some schools' ombuds are dual-hatted, including Nova Southeastern University's ombuds. How does a dual-hatted ombuds approach change agency and how is their experience as filling multiple formal positions at the university different from traditional ombuds who have a singular focus? Other studies could focus more on private schools University Ombuds, HBCU and other minority-focused University Ombuds, and even Ivy League University Ombuds and how their approach to change agency may differ from the information presented in this research. It could also be beneficial to expand the scope to include non-American universities; ombuds was founded in Sweden, so looking at how the University Ombuds promotes change in different countries (e.g. Sweden, Canada, Japan, Egypt) or regions (e.g. Scandinavia, East Asia, Middle East) could identify successful courses of action from across the world. These various approaches could later be tested in U.S.-based schools and measure their degrees of success.

Finally, it could be beneficial to conduct research comparing the University Ombuds' approach to change agency to that of traditional organizational ombuds officers in either the private sector or within government. The position of ombuds is unique to the needs of the organization but this study highlighted several commonalities between the 10 research participants and how they promote change. If 10 government or private sector ombuds were

interviewed with the same questions, how different would the results be? Additional research can be conducted to focus on specific private sectors (e.g. healthcare, tech, finance) to identify similarities and differences between ombuds approaches to change within their organization.

Contributions to the Field of Conflict Resolution

The findings of this research directly contribute to the field of conflict resolution as it relates to the organizational position of Ombuds. Through interviewing and information coding, the findings in this study are credible and of interest to others within the CR field who either serve as official ombuds officers for their organizations or fill the role and assume the responsibilities in an informal manner, such as leaders and managers who deploy ADR techniques. This research provides a deeper understanding of how ombuds officers enact change within an organization without formal authority, a topic scarcely addressed in current publications. Many books and articles exist outlining what ombuds are and the many functions they have, but few address effective approaches to the power dynamics within an organization, and even fewer address University Ombuds specifically. Understanding any potential relationship between the ombuds' approach to change and management's willingness to act could help in identifying and paving the way for more effective ombuds in the field across the spectrum of CR professionals in organizations.

The research presented has clear benefits that directly contribute to university ombuds. The main benefit is identifying successful approaches to enact change within a university, providing new ombuds programs, or at the very least, practitioners new to the ombuds field with transferable and applicable guidance based on patterns of success by professionals within the University Ombuds field.

If proven useful, the research could spawn additional studies focused on other organizational ombuds vectors, such as government, corporate, or NGO ombuds. Understanding the ombuds' approach to serving as change agents within their organization and best practices used by ombuds currently working in the field provides a better understanding of the requirements of the ombuds position and stresses critical methods and processes that ombuds should utilize. Producing better-prepared ombuds that can enact change consistently within their organization will produce stronger and more effective internal systems that will create desired outputs aligned with a group's mission and vision.

Conclusion

Conflict is unavoidable. Conflict is widespread. Conflict is expensive. These are accepted truths about conflict and the effects it has on the modern workplace. For many organizations, the position of ombuds is responsible for addressing conflict to maintain or improve output at a significantly lower cost than more traditional and litigious approaches to resolving issues and concerns. Ombuds lack formal authority to address conflict yet to reference the American leader and philanthropist Michael G. Scott, somehow they manage.

This research was conducted to understand how organizational ombuds, specifically University Ombuds, serve as agents of change within their academic institutions without formal authority. Through data collection and analysis, it became clear that University Ombuds wield a high degree of soft power derived primarily from two sources: positional reporting and trust building. While it is evident that ombuds cannot enact change on their own, they do have the ability to drive and promote change by leveraging their relationships with institutional leaders and their use of soft skills to encourage change at both the highest levels of the university as well as from the ground up. Qualitative analysis of the ombuds' approach to the university's social

hierarchy highlighted that while University Ombuds usually approach the various echelons of the organization differently, the ombuds provide equitable support to all people based on their needs and goals.

This paper is not meant to serve as a "how to" guide for ombuds; instead, it serves the purpose of providing a snapshot in time of how University Ombuds approach change. Additional research can be conducted to gain deeper insights into how ombuds approach change in a variety of different cases, as well as monitor the evolution of the ombuds position as it continues to grow and evolve. However, it is clear through this research that ombuds is a unique position that offers tremendous benefits to their organization by not only addressing conflict after it unfolds, but through trend identification and analysis ombuds can provide insight to leaders to avoid a conflict before it becomes destructive. When handled effectively, conflict is temporary. Conflict can be productive. Conflict can be addressed. Conflict can lead to positive change.

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Appendix A: Interview Questions

Pre-Interview Questionnaire

How long have you been at your university as an ombuds?

What previous experience do you have as an ombuds?

What is your educational background?

What previous experience do you have outside of ombuds?

Who do you report to?

How is the Ombuds effort structured at your university? (e.g. are you a one-person department, or are you part of a team?)

Who do you interact with most in your position?

Ombuds Content

The following questions introduce broad, thematic concepts. Based on the participants' responses, subsets of questions will be asked to obtain more detailed information regarding the identified themes. Additionally, follow-on questions will differentiate population groups to conduct social system analysis to determine how ombuds approach different sub-organizations within their university.

1. What are your major responsibilities as university ombuds? [1] [2]
2. How do you, as a university ombuds, spend your time? [2]
3. What standards of practices are you, as an ombuds, held to without formal authority? [1]
4. How do you, as a university ombuds, most effectively identify trends within your organizations that should be addressed? [2]
5. How do you, as a university ombuds, most effectively approach transitioning observation into action within your organizations? [1]
6. How do conflicts vary at different levels within the University? [3]
7. Do you approach different groups within an organization differently? [3]
8. What major challenges do you face as a university ombuds? [1]
9. How do you, as an Ombuds, navigate through challenges related to reporting findings? [2]

10. From where do you, as an ombuds, derive your soft power (Ombud's sources of power)?[1]
11. How do you, as a University Ombuds, foster trust with the various parties? [2] [3]
12. How would you define success within the framework of your position as a university ombuds? [1]

Notes

[1] Associated with Addressal 1

[2] Associated with Addressal 2

[3] Associated with Addressal 3

Question 1 is relevant to Addressals 1 and 2

Question 11 is relevant to Addressals 2 and 3

Appendix B: Suggested Further Reading

Hertogh, M. L. M., & Kirkham, R. (2018). *Research handbook on the ombudsman*. Edward Elgar Pub., Inc.

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