

FAQs About UMCES Ombuds Services

1. What is an Ombuds?

We are organizational ombuds who are independent, informal, impartial, and confidential. We are a confidential resource for our students, faculty, and staff to discuss issues and/or concerns impacting the work environment.

2. Who are your Ombuds:

Jacqueline Villafañe at ombudsvillafane@mccammongroup.com and Tahirih Varner at ombudsvarner@mccammongroup.com are the Ombuds for the University of Maryland Center for Environmental Sciences.

3. Who can reach out to the Ombuds? How and when can I expect to hear back?

All full and part-time UMCES stakeholders (e.g., graduate students, staff, and faculty) with a concern related to the work environment are welcome to contact the Ombuds. Generally, the Ombuds will reply within 48 hours (business days). The Ombuds provides support for University of Maryland Center for Environmental Sciences.

4. What does the Ombuds do?

The Ombuds listens and works with the person to develop options to address the situation. For organizations and all stakeholders, ombuds help survey the terrain, assess risk, monitor trends, address challenges, and advocate for fair processes. The ombuds can also help provide information on how to report an issue to HR or through other formal channels. Ombuds can help address an issue informally or help you navigate how to formally report an issue.

5. What does the Ombuds not do?

The Ombuds does not advocate for a particular employee or management at UMCES, make binding decisions or mandate policies, provide legal advice or representation, conduct, or participate in investigations or other formal resolution processes, nor do they serve as a channel for reporting violations of policy or UMCES Code of Conduct unless there is imminent risk or harm.

6. When do I reach out to the Ombuds vs. HR?

You can reach out to the ombuds at any time with a conflict or concern and because, discussions with the Ombuds are confidential and informal, it is often helpful to bring issues to the ombuds early as opposed to waiting. Both HR and the Ombuds can help stakeholders think through various issues while the key distinctions are that the Ombuds has a different standard of confidentiality and cannot act as a formal channel for reporting policy violations or violations of UMCES.

To make a *formal* complaint, you should reach out to HR, your manager, or any manager or senior manager.

7. What are the examples of concerns for which the Ombuds might be able to offer support?

You may find it helpful to engage the Ombuds for information, to discuss issues, and develop options, such as when you:

- Experience an interpersonal challenge with a colleague or their manager and need assistance determining how to address it.
- Desire to discuss a concern informally and confidentially, allowing employees to retain control of the process, foster understanding of issues, and flexibility in crafting resolutions.
- Feel uncomfortable about a situation they have experienced and would like to discuss whether it's something they decide to report.
- Have a compliance, ethical, legal, or policy concern related to the workplace and want guidance on how to report it to UMCES.

8. If I reach out to the Ombuds, may I remain anonymous?

Yes. Please contact your UMCES Ombuds by phone or email us using a personal email to schedule time if you wish to remain anonymous. Our contact information is listed below.

Further, because it is a confidential resource, the Ombuds does not share identifying information about individuals. In situations in which the Ombuds believes that talking with other individuals may be of help, and there is not a risk of harm to self or other, you will be asked for permission before any disclosures are made.

9. May I formally report an issue to the Ombuds instead of HR?

No. The Ombuds is strictly an *informal* resource and does not serve as a formal reporting channel. If someone decides to bring a formal complaint it should be reported to HR, your manager or any manager or senior manager. You can certainly speak to the Ombuds to help you consider informal options.

10. What happens when I reach out to the Ombuds?

The Ombuds will:

- Respond to you generally within two business days.
- Provide you with time to discuss your situation in private with confidential services by phone or virtual.
- Listen carefully to your concern or complaints.
- Help you develop a list of options for resolving your concern.
- Provide information to questions you have regarding a policy or procedure.
- Work with you to develop a strategy for resolution.

11. What happens to information provided to the Ombuds? What gets reported to UMCES?

Because Ombuds are a confidential resource, they do not keep identifying information from individual cases. The Ombuds keeps aggregate information/statistics (that does not include confidential or attributable information) and periodically provides updates to the Office of the President with the intent to highlight emerging issues, identify trends, and suggest areas of improvement.

12. What are the exceptions to Confidentiality?

The Ombuds holds the identity and all communications with those seeking assistance in strict confidence and does not disclose confidential communications unless given permission to do so. The only exceptions are when there is imminent risk of serious harm, or where required by Title IX under Maryland State laws.

13. What authority does the Ombuds have?

The Ombuds may contact senior leadership at UMCES about thematic challenges or issues shared by UMCES employees and to make observations that support a change in policy or practice when appropriate. The Ombuds does not have the authority to mandate anyone (employees or management) to do anything they choose not to do.

14. Will managers know when an employee in their group reaches out to the Ombuds?

No. All engagement with the Ombuds is confidential unless there is imminent risk of serious harm or by agreement of the employee and the ombuds.

15. Will HR be notified when an employee reaches out to the Ombuds?

No, HR will not be informed when an employee reaches out to the Ombuds. All engagement with the Ombuds is confidential unless there is imminent risk of serious harm or by agreement of the employee and the ombuds.

16. Are there any instances in which the Ombuds will not be able to maintain confidentiality?

In the rare event the Ombuds determines that an imminent threat of serious harm exists and/or there is suspicion of abuse of any kind, the Ombuds can address any such situations. This determination will be made at the sole discretion of the Ombuds. In situations where the Ombuds believes that talking with other individuals may help, and there is not a risk of harm to self or other, the employee will be asked for permission before any disclosures are made.

17. What might I gain by contacting the Ombuds?

By contacting the Ombuds, you may gain insight into a complicated situation, a clearer perspective on an issue or concern, enhanced ability to effectively deal with a problem, identification and clarification of existing resources and options, an effective communication plan to resolve interpersonal issues and resolution of an ongoing problem that is impacting your ability to do your job.

18. Should I contact the Ombuds to give notice of a formal complaint to UMCES?

No. Discussions with the Ombuds are off-the-record and do not constitute formal notice of an issue, grievance, or complaint to UMCES. If you want to pursue a formal remedy, the Ombuds can help identify the appropriate resources at UMCES. You can still contact the Ombuds to discuss the problem that you would like addressed.

19. How does the Ombuds remain neutral?

The Ombuds' effectiveness and credibility is based on a commitment to being fair and supportive of each employee who contacts them. The Ombuds is not part of any one department at UMCES and is an independent contractor to UMCES allowing the Ombuds to be neutral. The Ombuds' job is to help employees make informed decisions for themselves with assistance and support in a private setting.

20. Will the Ombuds participate in formal proceedings?

No. The Ombuds does not serve as a witness and does not participate in any formal grievance process. The Ombuds will not testify in formal judicial or administrative hearings. If the Ombuds is asked to serve on a committee, it will be done in an advisory or ex-officio capacity only.

21. When should I reach out to the Ombuds vs. HR?

Sooner is better than later. While no concern or conflict is too little or too big for us to help with, the sooner you reach out for assistance, the more options you'll have to resolve your concerns effectively. You can talk with us in confidence about any issues related to UMCES.

22. What "tools" are available from the Ombuds to help address your concerns?

The Ombuds team use a range of conflict management approaches to include: leadership, conflict, and communication coaching, sounding board, consulting, facilitation, shuttle diplomacy, mediation and training, and additional methodologies to identify, manage, and address conflicts.

Although one or more of our approaches may facilitate a resolution, our overall focus is on listening and assisting individuals, exploring options, promoting self-determination, and empowering people to make the best-informed decisions for themselves. We also surface concerns to senior leadership so that UMCES can address issues proactively and support employees in resolving conflicts when they arise.

23. Can anyone in UMCES use email records to find out if someone reaches out to the Ombuds? Do you recommend reaching out from an anonymous email address on a personal device?

The McCammon Group Ombuds team cannot guarantee confidentiality when people use UMCES resources (e.g., UMCES MS Teams, UMCES email, UMCES phone) to communicate with the Ombuds. In contrast, UMCES does not have access to the McCammon Group Ombuds records. People concerned about confidentiality may use their personal email or phone to contact Ombuds with the understanding the Ombuds will ask the person(s) to confirm their employment with UMCES.

24. What is the difference between the Ombuds work and Mediation?

While both Ombuds and Mediators are designated neutrals that can facilitate discussions, one distinction is that in a formal mediation, the participants are required to sign an Agreement to Mediate form that outlines the confidentiality of the process and other general expectations. Agreements reached in mediation are also generally put into writing, making the process *formal*.

Your Ombuds are trained mediators and facilitate *informal* discussions that are off the record and *do not* include an Agreement to Mediate in the beginning of the process or Mediation Settlement Agreement at the end. Ombuds may facilitate conversations and meetings using mediation techniques. As designated neutrals, the Ombuds will not document or keep signed agreements, and will work with all parties to explore resolutions.

UMCES employees who want to engage in a formal mediation process may contact Geetha Ravindra at gravindra@mccammongroup.com. Geetha will assist in designating a trained mediator with The McCammon Group to mediate the matter.

25. Where do I go to learn more?

Please contact your Ombuds for the University of Maryland Center for Environmental Sciences:

- Tahirih Varner at ombudsvarner@mccammongroup.com at 202.412.9925
- Jacqueline Villafañe at ombudsvillafane@mccammongroup.com at 916.417.9761
- Employees can also learn more on the UMCES President's Website.