

# The Ombuds Office

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## Responding to Complaints

by Tom Sebok

### DO...

1. Convey your willingness to listen as objectively as possible.
2. Listen to the complainant's concerns – without rushing to judgment about the merits of his/her complaint.
3. Remember that the complaint, as you are hearing it, could be true, incomplete, or untrue.
4. After listening, identify the role you are willing/able to play (first to yourself, then to the complainant): a) arbitrator/decision-maker; b) mediator/facilitator; c) investigator; d) shuttle diplomat; e) rule enforcer; f) referral agent.
5. Identify the limits of your role – especially if you are being asked to do things you do not have the authority to do.
6. Ask the complainant what the ideal solution would look like to him/her.
7. Recognize and acknowledge any biases that might limit your objectivity. If necessary, make an appropriate referral for someone else to hear the complaint.
8. Summarize with the complainant what each of you will do next.
9. DO what you say you will do when you say you will do it. If you encounter unexpected delays, communicate to the complainant about that.
10. Maintain confidentiality to the extent you can.
11. Ask for help if you need it. If the allegations are of harassment or discrimination, refer it for investigation (e.g., Office of Discrimination and Harassment, Office of Student Conduct).

### DON'T...

1. Convey to the complainant that you are skeptical about his/her complaint.
2. Interrupt the complainant while she/he is telling her/his story.
3. Make promises you may not be able to keep (including the promise of confidentiality).
4. Minimize the complaint. For example, "This is no big deal."
5. Defend, explain, or interpret the actions of the person about whom the complaint is being made. For example, "I'm sure you must've misunderstood," "He would never have done that."
6. Accuse or blame the complainant for the problem. For example, "You must've said something to cause her to act that way" or "You're being too sensitive."
7. Indicate that no one else has made a similar complaint, thus implying you are skeptical about the truth of this complaint.
8. Procrastinate if you promised to call someone, investigate, etc., hoping the complainant will forget about it.
9. Ignore phone calls or letters from complainants.