Ombuds Office Report
Bridgewater State University
January 2024-June 2025

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The Bridgewater State University (BSU) Ombuds Office opened to serve faculty in January 2024. The establishment of an Ombuds Office at BSU originated within Academic Affairs and was later recommended as an outcome from the Presidential Task Force on Racial Justice. Further conversations resulted in staging the populations served by the ombuds to include faculty first, then staff, and eventually students. This report addresses only ombuds services to faculty, that is all full-time and part-time faculty, and librarian members of the Massachusetts State College Association (MSCA).

In higher education, it is the role of the ombuds to provide a confidential nonjudgmental space for all visitors to the office to ask questions, express concerns, and surface problems. BSU ombuds services are informal, that is the ombuds serves as a confidential resource, not an official reporting pathway nor a place to put the institution on notice. The ombuds addresses the concerns of visitors individually and approaches conflict management with dignity, fairness, and equity.

Ombuds practice is based upon four core ethical principles, confidentiality, neutrality, informality, and independence, which are integrated into the standards of practice. Together these principles and standards provide visitors to the office with a unique resource to discuss interpersonal concerns, intrapersonal dilemmas, and/or the interpretation of workplace policies and culture. The Ombuds helps visitors untangle complex issues and generate approaches and options for conflict resolution. Ombuds also bring forward broad issues of institutional concern and provide conflict-related data that can be used for institutional improvement.

The conflict management services provided by an ombuds allows visitors to share high stakes concerns as well as issues that are just starting to develop. It is the role of the ombuds to provide appropriate resources and referrals and offer visitors opportunities to resolve issues before they move to higher-cost formal processes. In serving the University as a whole, the ombuds may share patterns of concern among visitors that have the potential to disrupt institutional integrity.

Mission and Charter

The Ombuds Office Charter (2025) describes the mission of the Office:

> "The mission of the Ombuds Office is to foster a campus culture characterized by respectful communication, fair practices, and mutual understanding. The Ombuds Office supports BSU's mission, specifically the establishment of an inclusive community dedicated to the lifelong success of all students with a focus on the continuous improvement of its people. Ombuds Office services also align with BSU's strategic plan objective to cultivate practices that promote a positive workplace culture. The aim of the BSU Ombuds Office is to foster an ethical and civil campus culture in which differences can be resolved early and informally through respectful dialogue and fair processes."

The mission of the BSU Ombuds Office clearly supports civility, respectful dialogue and fair practices, while aiming to create a positive workplace culture.

Operations

Staffing

There is only one staff member, Pam Russell, acting in a part-time role as interim ombuds to provide ombuds services to faculty. When the office opens to staff, it is anticipated that the workload will increase warranting the hire of a more permanent part-time employee. As the office builds stakeholders for opening to students and eventually opens to students, it is anticipated that a full-time or two part-time ombuds will be needed to staff the office. The intent of hiring two part-time ombuds when opening to students would be to add diversity to the ombuds office, thus better matching the diversity characteristics of the student body.

Staff Professional Development Activities

In April 2024, Pam passed the certification exam offered by the International Ombuds Association (IOA) as the first step in becoming a Certified Organizational Ombuds Practitioner. She also enrolled in the mentoring program offered by IOA for new ombuds, where she gained tremendous support. Martha Patrick, University Ombuds and Director of Ombuds Services at the University of Massachusetts, Boston has also mentored Pam. IOA regularly offers professional development core courses, for a small fee, and free community connections virtual meetings. Pam completed two virtual core courses, the National Equity Project Workshop (4 hours) and Harmony Strategies (15 hours). She also participated in 5-6 hours of national level community connections conversations with other ombuds. Finally, the East Coast Ombuds Group (ECOG) offers an in-person professional development opportunity twice a year at either Harvard or the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Pam has attended three of these meetings to date.

Outreach

Between January 2024 and June 2025, presentations about ombuds office services were made to faculty department chairs, Division of Graduate and Continuing Studies chairs, and the new faculty that started in the fall of 2024. Two faculty department chairs invited Pam to present at one of their regularly scheduled department meetings. Pam also attended a Board of Trustees meeting and a meeting of the Part-time Faculty Coordinators.

In preparation for opening the ombuds office to staff, individual meetings were held with each divisional vice president. These meetings were followed up by a virtual or in-person meeting with the leadership staff for each division. Within Academic Affairs, separate presentations were made for Provosts Council and Academic Council. Four different meetings were held for the Operations Division and a separate meeting was held for the Office of Equal Opportunity staff. In addition, individual meetings were held with union stewards and the president of the American Federation of County, State, and Municipal Employees (AFCSME) union and the president of Association of Professional Administrators (APA) union. A presentation was also made at an open meeting of all BSU APA employees.

Data

This report includes only the data from ombuds services provided to faculty, that is full-time or part-time faculty and librarian members of the MSCA. Ombuds services were available just for faculty from January 2024 through June 2024, and then again from September 2024 through mid-June 2025, approximately 15 months. Since these data contain a limited number of visits for ombuds services, visitor identity characteristics are protected by sharing quantitative information only when more than four visits share the same generality.

Also to protect confidentiality and underscore neutrality, ombuds refer to all individuals that receive ombuds services as visitors. Each visitor has shared a specific issue or concern. These data report ombuds services provided for each concern, which allows for the same visitor to share more than one concern. Different concerns are counted as unique visits in the ombuds data.

As ombuds services become part of the BSU culture, year to year comparisons will become available for numerous data points. This information can be helpful in tracking the need for any additional conflict resolution services and areas where conflict services have mitigated concerns.
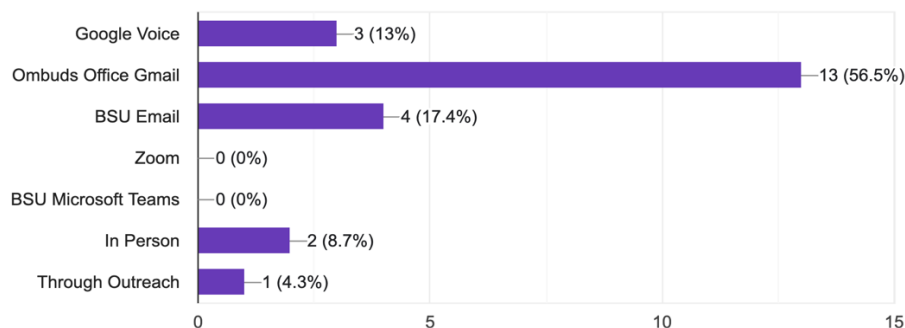
Intake Data
Between January 2024 and June 2025, the Ombuds Office provided services to 23 visitors with unique concerns, over 29 visits. Nearly 70% of the visitors identified as white and expressed their gender identity with she/her pronouns. At least 75% of visits were made by full-time faculty from the College of Humanities and Social Sciences, which houses nearly twice the number of departments as the other colleges. Likewise, at least 75% of the full-time faculty visits were by tenured faculty, given their years of employment at the University.

Close to 70% of visitors contacted the ombuds office through its Google email or through its Google phone number. These added layers of confidentiality are important to sustain.

Contact Method
23 responses

| Contact Method	Count
Google Voice	3 (13%)
Ombuds Office Gmail	13 (56.5%)
BSU Email	4 (17.4%)
Zoom	0 (0%)
BSU Microsoft Teams	0 (0%)
In Person	2 (8.7%)
Through Outreach	1 (4.3%)

Most visitors preferred in-person meetings. This highlights the importance of maintaining a welcoming space in which to provide ombuds office services.

Meeting Format
23 responses

Format	Percentage
In person	60.9%
Virtual (Zoom)	30.4%
Telephone	8.7%
Email Communication	
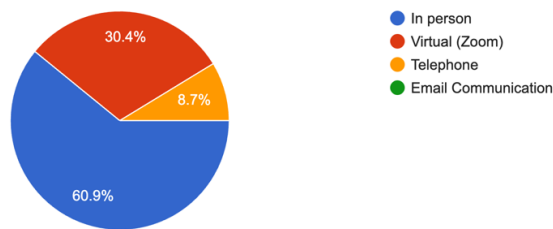
Initially most visitors heard about ombuds office services from the President's email announcing the opening of the office. As time progressed, visitors referred to other referral sources, such as the MSCA, the ombuds webpage, or referral by a department chair or colleague. Current collaboration is underway to create some posters and an Ombuds Office brochure to increase visibility as the office opens to serve staff.

In addition to the 23 unique visitors, other individuals contacted the ombuds office seeking information, resource recommendations, or appointment options. There were 15 contacts over the timeframe of this report and all of them received the information requested without the need for the formal ombuds intake process.

Visitor Concerns
A single visitor conversation with the ombuds often highlights multiple concerns, thus the percentages in the following data sets will not add to 100%. The concerns most often expressed by faculty included the following.

Concern	Percent of instances shared (number of times shared)
Civility/Respect/Treatment	52.2% (12)
Climate/Culture	21.7% (5)
Communication	52.2% (12)
Interpersonal Conflict	47.8% (11)

Multiple other concerns surfaced yet were identified by fewer than five visitors, thus they are not included here quantitatively to protect confidentiality. Some of these concerns included bullying/harassment, competence/performance, and equity/inclusion. Although the sharable data are limited at this point, there is initial evidence of the nature of the issues that visitors bring to the ombuds.

The International Ombuds Association (IOA) provides a different coding system to report concerns. IOA groups concerns into nine broad categories with specific concerns listed within each category. The coding system is appended to this report. Three of these nine broad categories are represented below, peer relationships, career progression/development, and values/ethics/standards. Use of this system provides another look at the data and allows comparisons across institutions that use the IOA coding system. The concerns most expressed by faculty using the IOA coding system were as follows.

Concern	Percent of instances shared (number of times shared)
Peer Relationships: Respect/Treatment	52.2% (12)
Peer Relationships: Communication	60.9% (14)
Career Progression/Development: Career Development/Coaching/Mentoring	21.7% (5)
Values/Ethics/Standards: Standards of Conduct	26.1% (6)

Some of the other concerns that surfaced for fewer than 5 visitors included communication in evaluative relationships, trust and integrity and bullying and mobbing, both in peer relationships, and values and culture.

Across both coding systems, communication and respect/treatment stand out as concerns for faculty visitors. As the ombuds office grows, it may determine that only one data coding system is needed to best describe the conflicts and concerns of visitors.

Ombuds Services

At the beginning of each visitor's appointment, the ombuds shared the ethical code of ombuds practice integrated with the standards of practice. Each visitor had an opportunity to ask questions regarding confidentiality, informality, neutrality, and independence prior to discussing their concerns. The most frequent services provided by the ombuds are listed below.

Ombuds Services	Percent of instances shared (number of times shared)
Conflict Coaching	56.5% (13)
Coaching (general/leadership)	30.4% (7)
Discussed/developed options	73.9% (17)

Other services provided for five or fewer visitors included explanation of polices and procedures, discussion with leadership, and inquiry on behalf of the visitor.

Ombuds Office Services Assessment

About each month, the Ombuds Office sends a four-question survey to each visitor. Data from the survey are anonymously recorded. Of the 23 assessments sent, there were 8 responses (34.7% response rate).

Prompt 1: I sought assistance from Ombuds Services because (please check all that apply):	Percent of responses
I wanted to talk with someone confidentially	100.%
I wanted to try to resolve my concern informally	37.5%
I wanted an unbiased and non-judgmental viewpoint on my concern	87.5%
It was suggested to me that I seek out Ombuds Office services	25%
I have previously used the Ombuds Office for services	
I was unable to resolve my concern through other channels	12.5%
Other	

These data clearly indicate that availability of a confidential space is paramount. Unbiased and non-judgmental viewpoints are also important to visitors as is an informal process. These traits represent three ethical codes of ombuds work, that is confidentiality, neutrality, and informality, as integrated into the standards of practice.

Prompt 2: How helpful was your interaction with the ombuds?				
Not at all - 1	2	3	4	Very - 5
12.5%			25%	62.5%

The vast majority of visitors indicated that the time they spent with the ombuds was helpful. Given the office is the first of its kind in the Massachusetts State College system, this is very welcome news, even though the data set is small.

Prompt 3: *If I had not gotten assistance from the ombuds, I would have likely (check all that apply):*	Percent of responses
kept my concerns to myself	37.5%
talked with trusted peers at work	62.5%
seen my performance at work suffer	37.5%
pursued a formal complaint or grievance through university processes	12.5%
pursued a complaint or grievance outside university processes	
resigned from my work at the university	12.5%
other	25%

These data indicate that ombuds office services have potential to promote a more positive workplace culture, at least one where workplace performance does not suffer due to conflict and individuals do not resign from their university roles. Albeit a small data set, it trends towards confirming the value of an ombuds office at BSU.

The last prompt was open-ended and asked each visitor to "*kindly share what about your experience with the ombuds went well and what the ombuds could have done better*". Comments in this section included phrases such as, "the experience was positive and helpful", the visitor was "more prepared for a difficult conversation", or the visitor felt they could "approach the problem in a different manner". The number of overall assessments completed is very small, yet these data are very positive.

Conclusion

In its first three semesters, the BSU Ombuds Office served only faculty, who made 23 unique visits. The majority of visitors were tenured, white, and identified with she/her pronouns. They were also from the College of Humanities and Social Sciences, the largest college at BSU. An in-person meeting space and the availability of a non-BSU phone number and email appeared critical to visitor willingness to seek ombuds services. When the office first opened visitors reported hearing about ombuds office services through the Presidents email announcement. Now, visitors are more likely to report referral to the office though the MSCA, a department chair, or a colleague.

Two different data coding systems were used to assess visitor concerns and both indicated that the majority of concerns involved interpersonal or peer conflict. These conflicts included concerns about civility and respect, along with communication. Almost 25% of the concerns fell into IOA's career progression category and included the desire to discuss mentoring and coaching. Services provided by the ombuds included discussion and development of options in almost 75% of the unique cases. Conflict coaching and general and leadership coaching were also a large part of the provided ombuds services.

The ombuds office assessment, completed by a small sample to date, indicated that a confidential conversation that provided a non-biased and non-judgmental viewpoint was a priority for visitors. Most often the provided ombuds services were very helpful. If ombuds services were not available, visitors would have most often talked with trusted peers. It is worth noting that less often, visitors would have seen their work suffer, filed a formal complaint, or left the university.

From the very few open-ended responses, it appears that ombuds office services have potential to help visitors to prepare for difficult conversations and to reframe their approach to concerns.

Bridgewater State's Ombuds Office is the first within the Massachusetts State College system and the services provided appeared to have a positive effect on the capacity of faculty visitors to address interpersonal conflict. Thus far, the ombuds office seems to have added value to the faculty experience at the University.

1. Compensation & Benefits

Questions, concerns, issues or inquiries about the equity, appropriateness and competitiveness of employee compensation, benefits and other benefit programs.

1.a **Compensation** (rate of pay, salary amount, job salary classification/level)

1.b **Payroll** (administration of pay, check wrong or delayed)

1.c **Benefits** (decisions related to medical, dental, life, vacation/sick leave, education, worker's compensation insurance, etc.)

1.d **Retirement, Pension** (eligibility, calculation of amount, retirement pension benefits)

1.e **Other** (any other employee compensation or benefit not described by the above sub-categories)

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2. Evaluative Relationships

Questions, concerns, issues or inquiries arising between people in evaluative relationships (i.e. supervisor-employee, faculty-student.)

2.a **Priorities, Values, Beliefs** (differences about what should be considered important – or most important – often rooted in ethical or moral beliefs)

2.b **Respect/Treatment** (demonstrations of inappropriate regard for people, not listening, rudeness, crudeness, etc.)

2.c **Trust/Integrity** (suspicion that others are not being honest, whether or to what extent one wishes to be honest, etc.)

2.d **Reputation** (possible impact of rumors and/or gossip about professional or personal matters)

2.e **Communication** (quality and/or quantity of communication)

2.f **Bullying, Mobbing** (abusive, threatening, and/or coercive behaviors)

2.g **Diversity-Related** (comments or behaviors perceived to be insensitive, offensive, or intolerant on the basis of an identity-related difference such as race, gender, nationality, sexual orientation)

2.h **Retaliation** (punitive behaviors for previous actions or comments, whistleblower)

2.i **Physical Violence** (actual or threats of bodily harm to another)

2.j **Assignments/Schedules** (appropriateness or fairness of tasks, expected volume of work)

2.k **Feedback** (feedback or recognition given, or responses to feedback received)

2.l **Consultation** (requests for help in dealing with issues between two or more individuals they supervise/teach or with other unusual situations in evaluative relationships)

2.m **Performance Appraisal/Grading** (job/academic performance in formal or informal evaluation)

2.n **Departmental Climate** (prevailing behaviors, norms, or attitudes within a department for which supervisors or faculty have responsibility.)

2.o **Supervisory Effectiveness** (management of department or classroom, failure to address issues)

2.p **Insubordination** (refusal to do what is asked)

2.q **Discipline** (appropriateness, timeliness, requirements, alternatives, or options for responding)

2.r **Equity of Treatment** (favoritism, one or more individuals receive preferential treatment)

2.s **Other** (any other evaluative relationship not described by the above sub-categories)

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3. Peer and Colleague Relationships

Questions, concerns, issues or inquiries involving peers or colleagues who do not have a supervisory–employee or student–professor relationship (e.g., two staff members within the same department or conflict involving members of a student organization.)

3.a **Priorities, Values, Beliefs** (differences about what should be considered important – or most important – often rooted in ethical or moral beliefs)

3.b **Respect/Treatment** (demonstrations of inappropriate regard for people, not listening, rudeness, crudeness, etc.)

3.c **Trust/Integrity** (suspicion that others are not being honest, whether or to what extent one wishes to be honest, etc.)

3.d **Reputation** (possible impact of rumors and/or gossip about professional or personal matters)

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3.h **Retaliation** (punitive behaviors for previous actions or comments, whistleblower)

3.i **Physical Violence** (actual or threats of bodily harm to another)

3.j **Other** (any peer or colleague relationship not described by the above sub-categories)

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4. Career Progression and Development

Questions, concerns, issues or inquiries about administrative processes and decisions regarding entering and leaving a job, what it entails, (i.e., recruitment, nature and place of assignment, job security, and separation.)

4.a **Job Application/Selection and Recruitment Processes** (recruitment and selection processes, facilitation of job applications, short-listing and criteria for selection, disputed decisions linked to recruitment and selection)

4.b **Job Classification and Description** (changes or disagreements over requirements of assignment, appropriate tasks)

4.c **Involuntary Transfer/Change of Assignment** (notice, selection and special dislocation rights/benefits, removal from prior duties, unrequested change of work tasks)

4.d **Tenure/Position Security/Ambiguity** (security of position or contract, provision of secure contractual categories)

4.e **Career Progression** (promotion, reappointment, or tenure)

4.f **Rotation and Duration of Assignment** (non-completion or over-extension of assignments in specific settings/countries, lack of access or involuntary transfer to specific roles/assignments, requests for transfer to other places/duties/roles)

4.g **Resignation** (concerns about whether or how to voluntarily terminate employment or how such a decision might be communicated appropriately)

4.h **Termination/Non-Renewal** (end of contract, non-renewal of contract, disputed permanent separation from organization)

4.i **Re-employment of Former or Retired Staff** (loss of competitive advantages associated with re-hiring retired staff, favoritism)

4.j **Position Elimination** (elimination or abolition of an individual's position)

4.k **Career Development, Coaching, Mentoring** (classroom, on-the-job, and varied assignments as training and developmental opportunities)

4.l **Other** (any other issues linked to recruitment, assignment, job security or separation not described by the above sub-categories)

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5. Legal, Regulatory, Financial and Compliance

Questions, concerns, issues or inquiries that may create a legal risk (financial, sanction etc.) for the organization or its members if not addressed, including issues related to waste, fraud or abuse.

5.a **Criminal Activity** (threats or crimes planned, observed, or experienced, fraud)

5.b **Business and Financial Practices** (inappropriate actions that abuse or waste organizational finances, facilities or equipment)

5.c **Harassment** (unwelcome physical, verbal, written, e-mail, audio, video psychological or sexual conduct that creates a hostile or intimidating environment)

5.d **Discrimination** (different treatment compared with others or exclusion from some benefit on the basis of, for example, gender, race, age, national origin, religion, etc.[being part of an Equal Employment Opportunity protected category – applies in the U.S.])

5.e **Disability, Temporary or Permanent, Reasonable Accommodation** (extra time on exams, provision of assistive technology, interpreters, or Braille materials including questions on policies, etc. for people with disabilities)

5.f **Accessibility** (removal of physical barriers, providing ramps, elevators, etc.)

5.g **Intellectual Property Rights** (e.g., copyright and patent infringement)

5.h **Privacy and Security of Information** (release or access to individual or organizational private or confidential information)

5.i **Property Damage** (personal property damage, liabilities)

5.j **Other** (any other legal, financial and compliance issue not described by the above sub-categories)

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6. Safety, Health, and Physical Environment

Questions, concerns, issues or inquiries about Safety, Health and Infrastructure-related issues.

6.a **Safety** (physical safety, injury, medical evacuation, meeting federal and state requirements for training and equipment)

6.b **Physical Working/Living Conditions** (temperature, odors, noise, available space, lighting, etc)

6.c **Ergonomics** (proper set-up of workstation affecting physical functioning)

6.d **Cleanliness** (sanitary conditions and facilities to prevent the spread of disease)

6.e **Security** (adequate lighting in parking lots, metal detectors, guards, limited access to building by outsiders, anti-terrorists measures (not for classifying "compromise of classified or top secret" information)

6.f **Telework/Flexplace** (ability to work from home or other location because of business or personal need, e.g., in case of man-made or natural emergency)

6.g **Safety Equipment** (access to/use of safety equipment as well as access to or use of safety equipment, e.g., fire extinguisher)

6.h **Environmental Policies** (policies not being followed, being unfair ineffective, cumbersome)

6.i **Work Related Stress and Work–Life Balance** (Post-Traumatic Stress, Critical Incident Response, internal/external stress, e.g. divorce, shooting, caring for sick, injured)

6.j **Other** (any safety, health, or physical environment issue not described by the above sub-categories)

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7. Services/Administrative Issues

Questions, concerns, issues or inquiries about services or administrative offices including from external parties.

7.a **Quality of Services** (how well services were provided, accuracy or thoroughness of information, competence, etc.)

7.b **Responsiveness/Timeliness** (time involved in getting a response or return call or about the time for a complete response to be provided)

7.c **Administrative Decisions and Interpretation/Application of Rules** (impact of non-disciplinary decisions, decisions about requests for administrative and academic services, e.g., exceptions to policy deadlines or limits, refund requests, appeals of library or parking fines, application for financial aid, etc.)

7.d **Behavior of Service Provider(s)** (how an administrator or staff member spoke to or dealt with a constituent, customer, or client, e.g., rude, inattentive, or impatient)

7.e **Other** (any services or administrative issue not described by the above sub-categories)

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8. Organizational, Strategic, and Mission Related

Questions, concerns, issues or inquiries that relate to the whole or some part of an organization.

8.a **Strategic and Mission-Related/ Strategic and Technical Management** (principles, decisions and actions related to where and how the organization is moving)

8.b **Leadership and Management** (quality/capacity of management and/or management/leadership decisions, suggested training, reassignments and reorganizations)

8.c **Use of Positional Power/Authority** (lack or abuse of power provided by individual's position)

8.d **Communication** (content, style, timing, effects and amount of organizational and leader's communication, quality of communication about strategic issues)

8.e **Restructuring and Relocation** (issues related to broad scope planned or actual restructuring and/or relocation affecting the whole or major divisions of an organization, e.g. downsizing, of shoring, outsourcing)

8.f **Organizational Climate** (issues related to organizational morale and/or capacity for functioning)

8.g **Change Management** (making, responding or adapting to organizational changes, quality of leadership in facilitating organizational change)

8.h **Priority Setting and/or Funding** (disputes about setting organizational/departmental priorities and/or allocation of funding within programs)

8.i **Data, Methodology, Interpretation of Results** (scientific disputes about the conduct, outcomes and interpretation of studies and resulting data for policy)

8.j **Interdepartment/Interorganization Work/Territory** (disputes about which department/organization should be doing what/taking the lead)

8.k **Other** (any organizational issue not described by the above sub-categories)

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9. Values, Ethics, and Standards

Questions, concerns, issues or inquiries about the fairness of organizational values, ethics, and/or standards, the application of related policies and/or procedures, or the need for creation or revision of policies, and/or standards.

9.a **Standards of Conduct** (fairness, applicability or lack of behavioral guidelines and/or Codes of Conduct, e.g., Academic Honesty, plagiarism, Code of Conduct, conflict of interest)

9.b **Values and Culture** (questions, concerns or issues about the values or culture of the organization)

9.c **Scientific Conduct/Integrity** (scientific or research misconduct or misdemeanors, e.g., authorship; falsification of results)

9.d **Policies and Procedures NOT Covered in Broad Categories 1 thru 8** (fairness or lack of policy or the application of the policy, policy not followed, or needs revision, e.g., appropriate dress, use of internet or cell phones)

9.e **Other** (Other policy, procedure, ethics or standards issues not described in the above sub-categories)

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