

Solicited Proposal for SFA Ombuds Position

From September 2014 to February 2015, the Ethics committee (Leslie G. Cecil, Chair, David McKemy, Steve Taaffe, and Johanna Warwick) examined the possibility of SFA adding an Ombuds position (under the supervision of the Provost). This inquiry resulted from an earlier campus-wide survey on bullying conducted by Dr. Leslie Cecil and Dr. Cindy Pressley. Data from this survey, along with an open-forum to discuss this behavior over coffee (Faculty Senate Coffee on February 6, 2014), indicated SFA faculty and staff witnessed and/or were recipients of repeated and unreasonable actions that made his/her workplace counter to the proposed SFA Envisioned Strategic Plan of a SFA campus culture that is “open, collaborative, and engaged” with a “respectful workplace where civility, inclusivity, and accountability are guiding principles for everyone” (www.sfasu.edu/strategicplan/).

The greatest concern expressed by the participants in the survey and coffee was that there was no place or individual to report inappropriate behavior that was not covered by SFA Policy 2.11 (Discrimination Complaints/Sexual Harassment). In addition to that main concern, people were less likely to report inappropriate behavior not covered by Policy 2.11 because the chain of reporting of such incidents included the person’s supervisor who was typically seen as the person causing the behavior. Additional comments included that faculty and staff felt that they were:

- constantly and unfairly scrutinized,
- criticized in public with inappropriate and aggressive questions,
- victims of the spread of rumors and misconceptions,
- victims of attempts of others to turn against them, and
- victims of attempts to block career goals.

Reporters of these behaviors stated that administration (including Chairs and members of the Board of Regents), positions of higher rank, but not necessarily direct supervisors, supervisors, other faculty, and students were conducting the inappropriate behavior. These behaviors are counterproductive to the proposed SFA Envisioned Strategic Plan.

As a result of the Bullying survey, the Faculty Senate coffee, and discussions in Faculty Senate, most participants who were familiar with the Ombuds position thought that this position would be a great asset to SFA and provide some relief to the chain of reporting problems. After a more formal presentation of the duties of the position, the Faculty Senate, at the suggestion of Dr. Berry, submits this solicited proposal to the SFA administration for their consideration of the institution of the Ombuds position.

The position of Ombuds would not be unique to SFA. Of the 58 Texas schools (and systems) analyzed, all University systems except Texas Tech have an Ombuds position. Six other universities also have this position: University of Houston System, University of Dallas, University of North Texas System, Trinity University, University of Texas System, University of St. Thomas, Texas A&M University System, Texas State University System, Texas State Technical College System, Texas Southern University, Texas Woman's University, and Baylor University.

The SFA Ombuds would have duties similar to any other Ombuds in Texas. According to the University of Texas Ombuds Office and the Ombuds of Texas, an Ombuds Office typically addresses questions/complaints about the University, facilitates communication between concerned parties, and hears inquiries about pay inequity, unfair treatment, unethical/inappropriate behavior, policy practice and interpretation, and interpersonal conflicts. Additionally an Ombuds Office serves as an impartial and confidential sounding board. An Ombuds Office does not serve as an advocate, maintain official records, make rulings about policy, overrule University policy, and provide legal advice or counseling to any party. The Ombuds Office is available to both faculty and staff.

The SFA Ombuds Office would fall under the direct supervision of the Provost as is typical in the state of Texas. Of the 58 Texas schools (and systems) analyzed, the Ombuds direct supervisor is in all cases but two is the President or the Provost. The two exceptions are the Faculty Senate (Texas State Technical College System) and Campus Ministries (University of St. Thomas). The Faculty Senate Chair at the Texas State Technical College System stated that the Ombuds position in the Senate is a subcommittee and other faculty and staff do not see the Ombuds as having any authority because Senators are appointed. He stated that an outside person would be a much better idea as the Ombuds would be seen as someone more official.

The SFA Ombuds position would not be an additional salary line, but a .25 FTE reduction. This falls within the parameters of other Ombuds in Texas. If the case load exceeds 20 cases per year, the Provost may want to reconsider the FTE reduction to .5 FTE. Of the Texas universities analyzed, only the University of Texas system provides a .5 FTE because of a high case load. The professors that have this position at other universities are not in the legal field, but are regular faculty (except for the one paid position).

Rather than suggest a faculty member at SFA to fill this position, we believe that the position should be advertised internally and with a formal search similar to any other administrative position. This would ensure fairness in the hiring position and faculty and staff would not perceive this position as a personal favor to anyone, but the Ombuds would have been appointed because of his/her qualifications. Finally, the Ombuds position must be available to **both** faculty and staff.

Given the lack of an opportunity for faculty and staff to obtain resolutions with workplace problems that do not fall under the Discrimination Complaints/Sexual Harassment policy (2.11) (such as bullying), an Ombuds may be a welcome addition at SFA. This would not cost SFA any additional money beyond a course reduction. There are two important organizations that most of the Texas Ombuds have membership in (and we suggest that SFA's Ombuds has membership in these): Ombuds of Texas and the International Ombudsman Association. The Ombuds that Dr. Cecil has spoken to during this investigation stated that they would be more than willing to help us get a program started at SFA. Therefore, it seems that all we would need to ensure a free, fair, and without conflict workplace for all would be as simple as faculty members willing to serve and administration agreement that an Ombuds is necessary at SFA.