

Faculty Senate Proposal: Ombuds Position

Austin Peay State University has a strong sense of community and continues to enjoy and improve good relations among faculty and between faculty and the other groups of the University—administration, staff, and students. As in any organization, however, interpersonal concerns arise. Often, the affected faculty members bring such concerns to Faculty Senate to ask for advice, for mediation, or simply for a sounding board. To improve and focus the performance of such functions, the Executive Committee proposes an ombuds position.

The Austin Peay Faculty Senate Constitution defines duties of the Senate as to “investigate, consider, and act on any matter the Senate deems appropriate by virtue of relevance to the concerns of the University faculty” (Article I, Section I). While addressing “concerns of the University faculty” justifies advising faculty members, mediating between them, or hearing out their concerns, the role of Faculty Senate as a whole and in the Executive Committee is more properly to represent the faculty as a group. Especially when a concern arises between members of the faculty (rather than between a faculty member and a member of another University group), investigating and considering the concern may be feasible, but acting on it complicates the representative duty of Faculty Senate and the goals of independence, neutrality and impartiality, and informality advocated by the International Ombudsman Association (ombudsassociation.org/standards/StdPractice_1-07.pdf) for fairly dealing with people involved in an issue. Fairness would, of course, also be important in any concerns involving a faculty member and a member of another University group. Similarly, many personnel concerns have proper avenues through department chairs, deans, the Faculty and Staff Grievance Committee, and other members of the University organization, which have formal and specific roles and responsibilities that restrict the goals of an ombuds position.

The Executive Committee proposes to nominate a candidate, with the Faculty Senate’s vote, for the Provost to appoint to an ombuds position for a two-year term. To address criteria of independence and neutrality, a candidate on post-retirement would be highly desirable, but the candidate must at least be tenured. A candidate on post-retirement also offers experience in academic concerns generally and Austin Peay institutional memory specifically and can maintain distance from other professional responsibilities and contacts to qualify in the criteria of confidentiality and informality. The two-year term allows time for someone in the ombuds position to train in principles and practices (ombudsassociation.org/training/), to deal with long-term concerns, and to provide time for selection and training of an ombuds-elect. The Faculty Senate office can serve, at least to begin, as a place for meetings with faculty members.

Other universities staff ombuds positions at any workload from one-fifth to full time responsibility. While the role may expand, to begin we propose reassign time of three teaching-load credits for Austin Peay’s faculty ombuds position. As dealing with student concerns can easily grow to a full-time job, we propose this ombuds position remain a resource for faculty members to come to although faculty may initiate contact on concerns relating to students. Although *ombudsman* is a common term and is arguably nonsexist because of its derivation from Swedish, the suffix is a literal cognate, and so we recommend avoiding use of *ombudsman*. Finally, we propose to charge the Handbook/Policy Committee to add information about Austin Peay’s ombuds position (regarding the role and compensation) to the Faculty Handbook and

appropriate University policies (as with compensation policy for the Faculty Senate President, Vice President, and Secretary if those compensation proposals are approved) and charge the Faculty Senate Rules Committee to add information to the Faculty Senate Bylaws.

As Faculty Senate, supervisors, grievance and appeals committees, the Legal Affairs Office, and other means of resolving concerns are in place at Austin Peay, an ombuds position will not serve to settle or determine resolutions but to act as a resource for advice, mediation, or dialogue. This kind of resource should be valuable in many ways to maintaining positive, effective relations and operations at Austin Peay. Attached are files from the web sites and handbooks of other universities' ombuds offices.

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