

Year 1 Public Description of Work for
Action Collaborative on Preventing Sexual Harassment in Higher Education

Cold Spring Harbor Laboratory

Setting up a Part-time Ombud's Office (during a pandemic)

This Action Applies to Rubric Item(s): 13, 14, 17

SUMMARY

A recommendation in the NASEM report was to consider the addition of an Ombud's office to provide an anonymous, non-mandatory reporting option. This was also a request we at Cold Spring Harbor Laboratory (CSHL) received from various stakeholders on campus, including faculty, students and staff. Our institution is smaller than most universities and research institutions, which offered a few unique challenges in setting up this new office. In mid-2019, we began investigating options and developing a plan, and by March 2020 hired our first Ombud, opting to hire a part-time consultant to fulfill this need. The purpose and goals of the CSHL Ombud are to provide an independent, confidential channel for all members of the CSHL community to anonymously voice concerns, evaluate a situation, identify options, and resolve conflicts or uncertainties.

BACKGROUND

Cold Spring Harbor Laboratory (CSHL) is a private, nonprofit biomedical research institute with 55 research labs, a small biomedical sciences graduate school, and an extramural meetings & courses programs. Apart from a summer research program (20-25 students) the institution does not have any undergraduate students. The total number of faculty, students, and employees at CSHL currently is around 1100. Our relatively small size compared to larger institutions provides unique challenges to providing the scope of resources and programs that are becoming standard in traditional higher education and academic research settings. This is not so much a limitation as it is an opportunity to assess a range of solutions and come up with our own approach that can best serve the needs of our community.

Several of the NASEM recommendations pointed towards the benefit of an Ombud's office in addressing sexual and gender harassment. Specifically, to: 1) provide anonymous, non-mandatory reporting channels outside of faculty or usual workplace hierarchy); 2) implement alternative means of resolutions; and 3) increase confidential resources. These were consistent with feedback and requests we've received from our community. In response to these recommendations and requests, in 2019 we began to explore how best to provide this resource at CSHL.

INITIAL STEPS

An important first step to our process in setting up our first Ombud's office was to have discussions with the CSHL President and other senior institutional leaders to provide information on the general role of an Ombud's and how this office can address unmet needs on campus. Once we agreed what was needed and secured support from the senior leadership, we began to establish a basic framework for how this would work at CSHL. Because of our size, a key early question was whether this would be a full-time or part-time position, and the corresponding options for each. Our Human Resources department investigated by reaching out to colleagues at institutions that had Ombuds' offices. We decided that, based on our size, this would be a part-time position, and we choose to go with an independent contractor rather than a part-time employee as this provides more flexibility and opportunity to scale up/down based on campus needs. Hiring an independent contractor also provides a

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true “neutral” party to take on this important role. The [International Ombudsman Association](#) (IOA) was an additional resource as we tried to develop a description for the CSHL Ombud and the general parameters of how the position would integrate into our organization. We posted the opening in November 2019 and received a range of applicants with varied expertise – some with experience within academic settings, some without; and some that had previous Ombuds experience. The best fit for CSHL was an independent contractor experienced with conflict resolution and mediation.

STARTING THE NEW OFFICE

The CSHL Ombud was hired just a few weeks before the COVID-19 pandemic reached the New York area, which slightly delayed implementation due to restricted operations during lock-down. We were able to adapt our initial plans, converting to a fully virtual office starting in June 2020. An important goal for the initial months was to inform the CSHL community about this new resource. To that end, we developed an intranet site, circulated flyers (virtual and physical postings), and used other campus announcement platforms. In parallel, the Ombud needed some time to learn about the institution’s organization, culture and policies. One strategy that the new Ombud took was to outreach to various groups – e.g. postdoctoral fellows, assistant professors, core facility staff – scheduling small group, informal “meet & greet” discussions. In addition to allowing the Ombud an opportunity to learn about (and from) these groups, the outreach was an additional way to socialize the Ombud’s role to CSHL personnel. This was an especially challenging process given the limits of quarantines, social distancing, and Zoom, but has been successful as determined by the increasing number of visitors and inquiries that the new office has been receiving as more of these meetings occur. In addition, while the Ombud does not report directly to anyone at the institution, they do meet regularly with the CSHL President and other senior leaders to continue to learn about the institution’s culture, ask about specific policies and processes, and receive/provide any general feedback on how the new office is operating.

According to the new Ombud, the two most important resources during these first 6 months have been:

- Connecting with IOA and fellow Organizational Ombuds on a regular basis. Each Ombud has rich insights and experience to help process sensitive issues, align the office with IOA Standards of Practice, and assist with everything from outreach tips to administrative best-practices, to tools and skills-building.
- Senior leaders and seasoned/trusted employees at CSHL who embrace the office and help improve access and visibility; encouragement and support from the top and from those who have built a trusted reputation on campus has been extremely helpful in conveying the message campus-wide that the Ombud is an impactful resource for all employees and staff.

A few additional lessons learned during the early stages:

- A strong and consistent communication strategy was critical to educating the community about what an Ombud can offer, and how this is different from other resources on campus.
- In developing a framework for the role, it is important to factor in time for the Ombud to spend on administrative tasks and outreach – particularly if they have minimal administrative support; this includes outreach across campus, but also with other Ombuds to share best practices.
- In our case, employing an independent contractor has helped build trust and assure confidentiality, so that individuals feel safe and comfortable sharing whatever is on their mind.

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- For Ombuds who are new to an institution and to academic science, there needs to be effort made to educate about different hierarchies and relationships, as well as the institution's current processes and policies.

EVALUATION

The CSHL Ombud has set up an anonymous feedback system: a generic form is featured in the Ombud's email signature so that anyone who has experience with the office can provide feedback on the effectiveness and quality of the experience. Aside from this anonymous feedback, direct questions, comments, and insights from senior leaders on campus, as well as individual visitors, are helpful with evaluating the office. This feedback informs the Ombud on how to modify processes, clarify scope of work, and improve services.

NEXT STEPS

The CSHL Ombud will continue to work on outreach and increasing visibility as well as learning more about the institutional culture. In the next year, we would like to integrate the Ombud into some of our developing educational initiatives, particularly concerning conflict resolution and mediation. In addition, an Ombud's Office Charter is being drafted, which will describe the purpose of the office, how it functions, and its relationship to the institution. The IOA highly advises having a Charter in place, in order to avoid any misunderstandings. It serves to clarify the roles, duties, and function of the office, as well as providing legal protection for both the institution and the Ombud.

Finally, we hope to be transitioning out of having just a virtual Ombud's office. Getting to know individuals is notably different over Zoom, and the Ombud is limited in ability to read body language, know that the person is entirely focused on the conversation, and to read the "energy" of the room. However, there have been numerous advantages to having a virtual office, including more time and timing flexibility, and the ability to speak with visitors while they are in a physically comfortable place. It also removes the concern of having a physical office on campus where visitors may be identified when entering/exiting. It is possible that a hybrid virtual/in-person setup could be a good balance, and something we will consider in the future.

Website for further information: <https://www.cshl.edu/about-us/dei/#initiatives>

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