

Policy 947 Ombudsperson

Policy Number: 947

Effective Date: 04/02/2024

Revised Dates: 07/31/2025

Scope

This Ombudsperson Policy applies to program participants who are learners engaged in education programs (i.e. graduate students, Summer Scholars, Research Scholars, Computational Biology Scholars, visiting students from other education institutions, and other education programs) (“participants”) of The Graduate School of the Stowers Institute for Medical Research (“School”).

Purpose

The purpose of this Policy is to outline for participants the role and function of the School’s Ombudsperson.

Ombudsperson Function

The primary functions of the Ombudsperson are to serve as a confidential, informal, neutral, and independent resource to School program participants, and to promote constructive problem-solving, effective communication, mutual respect, fairness, and increased organizational capacity for conflict management. The work of the Ombudsperson is meant to help address participant concerns or conflicts at early stages and suggest appropriate resolutions. Because of this, participants are encouraged to reach out with their concerns no matter how small. The response of the Ombudsperson is unique to the dynamics of the situation, the nature of the concerns, and the participant’s desires. Where the Ombudsperson provides a neutral and confidential channel of communication, it supplements rather than replaces existing formal channels of communication/resolution. Moreover, the Ombudsperson not only assists School’s program participants in resolving concerns and conflict, but also helps the School operate in a manner consistent with the mission and ideals of the School.

Policy

The Ombudsperson is authorized to:

- Provide to participants an independent, impartial, informal, and confidential resource for participants with concerns or conflicts related to academic or educational experiences or to the learning environment,
- Aid in answering participant’s questions, and assist in the resolution of concerns,
- Assist participants in identifying options and processes,
- Serve as a source of information and referral for participants about School processes, policies, and resources, and
- Provide anonymized, aggregated, and non-confidential feedback to the School’s administration on concerns and trends while maintaining confidentiality of individuals.

Independence

The Ombudsperson is independent in function and appearance, to the highest degree possible within the School. The Ombudsperson reports directly to the President in a manner that is independent of ordinary staff structure. This independence means that the Ombudsperson exercises sole discretion regarding whether to become involved in a matter and what steps to undertake regarding the matter. Further, the Ombudsperson will:

- Be free of conflict from other roles in the School for formal policy-making or disciplinary actions and will disclose any potential conflicts that may compromise independence to serve,
- Clearly indicate, when acting in the role of Ombudsperson, if they have other roles within the School or the Stowers Group of Companies,
- Be impartial, neutral, and unbiased and decline to be involved in an issue where they may have a personal interest,
- Keep confidential the identity of those seeking advice and keep communications confidential pursuant to this Policy, and
- Be independent in deciding how to address an individual or School issue and will be free of consequences of providing advice to participants. The Ombudsperson may decline to assist with a matter if the Ombudsperson believes involvement is inappropriate for any reason, including that the matter was not brought in good faith or where the matter appears to be a misuse of/not covered by the Policy.

Ombudsperson Services

Contact information for the Ombudsperson is available on the School's website and Helix page.

Participants may independently seek advice from the Ombudsperson on issues related to concerns or conflicts regarding academic or educational experiences or to the learning environment.

- *Informal Process:* The Ombudsperson functions on an informal and off-the-record basis, with no formal records kept (including no retention of records with confidential or personally identifiable information). The Ombudsperson has no authority to act on behalf of the School.
- *Neutrality:* The Ombudsperson is neutral, unaligned, promotes equitable processes, and does not advocate for or represent any party to a dispute, conflict, or issue. The role does not take sides. Instead, the Ombudsperson advocates for fair process, and considers the rights and interests of all parties involved with the goal of facilitating mutually agreeable resolutions that are fair and in keeping with School's policies and the law. The Ombudsperson facilitates communication and helps identify a range of appropriate options. The Ombudsperson serves as a source of information about policies and procedures and may refer participants to appropriate resources.
- *Confidentiality:* Confidentiality is essential to the work of the Ombudsperson. The Ombudsperson holds the identity and all communications with those seeking assistance in strict confidence, unless:

- The participant gives the Ombudsperson explicit permission to make a disclosure and the Ombudsperson determines, in their sole discretion, that it is appropriate to do so; or
- The Ombudsperson determines that there is an imminent risk of serious harm; or,
- The Ombudsperson is expressly required by law/School policy to make the disclosure, such as a potential Title IX violation. All potential Title IX violations must be reported in accordance with GSSIMR Policy 913 Sexual Harassment and Other Forms of Harassment. The Ombudsperson will inform a participant if their matter is likely to require a breach of confidentiality.

Ombudsperson Services Not Provided

- Ombudsperson services supplement the School's formal channels of communication/resolution (including all grievance and complaint policies/procedures) and the Ombudsperson services do not replace such formal channels of communication/resolution.
- The Ombudsperson is not designated by the School to receive reports of School policy violations or of unlawful practices.
 - Communications made to the Ombudsperson regarding possible violations do not constitute notice to the School. This provision ensures the freedom of the Ombudsperson to work independently and confidentially with participants.
 - If a participant would like to make a formal report of a problem or concern, the Ombudsperson may inform the participant about how to do so.
- The Ombudsperson follows no prescribed sequence of steps and is not a required step in any formal School policy or process.
- The Ombudsperson has no authority to act or make decisions or investigate, arbitrate, judge, discipline, award, or in any other way participate in any formal investigation or formal process concerning School or the Stowers Group of Companies' matters.
- The Ombudsperson does not perform formal investigations, offer opinions on administrative decisions, or participate in formal complaint or grievance proceedings.
- Because the Ombudsperson is a purely voluntary resource that no one is required to use, those who do so will be understood to have agreed to the terms, conditions, and principles upon which the role was created and operates and to not disclose or call on the Ombudsperson to testify or produce documents relating to confidential communications in any legal, administrative, or other proceedings, and the School has also agreed not to call the Ombudsperson to testify or produce documents relating to confidential communications in any such proceedings.
- The Ombudsperson also has no authority to make, change, overrule, or set aside School decisions or policy.
- The Ombudsperson does not give legal advice.

- The Ombudsperson is not a formal agent or representative of the School or any member of the Stowers Group of Companies and is not authorized to receive institutional notice of claims or grievance. The Ombudsperson may refer individuals to the appropriate place for formal notice of claims.

This Policy was approved by the GSSIMR Board of Directors on April 02, 2024.

This Policy was reviewed and amended by the GSSIMR Board of Directors on September 18, 2025.

This policy will be reviewed again by the GSSIMR Board according to the annual policy review schedule.