Unsure of where to turn? Meet the University Ombudsman

By Valerie Brown
Features Editor

The brochure for the office asks, “need help? Don’t know where to turn?” It’s principles include, confidentiality, neutrality and independence. It is the office of the University Ombudsman, a facility used by many, but still unknown to some in the university community.

Ombudsman is a Swedish term that refers to a highly placed government official that a citizen could go to when they had a complaint explained John Barkat, University Ombudsman. The term became popular in the 1960’s with the position being placed in major corporations Barkat explained. With the term Ombudsman being relatively unknown, the function of the office must be clearly defined.

The office serves as an independent consultant in the university and is a place where any student or staff member can go when they have a concern or a complaint according to John Barkat, University Ombuds. Located in Dow Residence Hall on the Briarcliff campus, the office is a place where you can go, and not be seen.

With the office not being located in any major office building, those wishing to discuss confidential issues with the Ombudsman can walk into the residence hall turn left and sneak into the office. Barkat’s office is fully equipped with an oval office style secret exit door. “It is a separate way out that allows you to not be seen by someone else coming in,” Barkat said.

Explaining that the office is a good first step when you don’t know where to go, because you won’t lose anything, Barkat explained that the office is based on three principles the office prides itself first on confidentiality, explaining that the university has agreed to honor the confidentiality. With confidentiality, counseling and personal development are among the many services the office provides. Pace considers this a place where students and faculty can speak off the record.

“I will not advocate for a particular individual. I stand for a just community and a fair process for everyone. This defines the office’s second principle, neutrality. “If someone is being unfairly treated, I will stand up for that,” Barkat said.

With the ability to operate with a degree of freedom in investigating matters at all levels of the institution, Barkat explained the third principle as being independence.

“We don’t report to any function of the university and no names are specified in our records,” Barkat said. “Courts have upheld the right to obtain records. To protect confidentiality in case someone comes for a our records no names are entered.

Examples of how the Ombudsman has assisted staff members and students were discussed without specifically naming any clients and were discussed broadly in the efforts of understanding the function of the office.
Barkat explained one situation with a student client who felt a professor’s course had been too difficult and explained that a majority of the students in the class were failing.

“The student explained that everyone wasn’t doing well and they had wanted their money back,” Barkat said. “This was something that I could investigate, so I looked at the grading and found that 50 percent of the students had failed or dropped out of the class. Barkat then presented the information to the Dean. I don’t say that the class was too hard, I simply presented the information to the Dean, calling it to their attention,” Barkat said.

“I feel there are always two sides to a situation, but I try to shed light on the situation and make sure that something is done,” Barkat said. Sometimes something is done, sometimes it is not. If they don’t, I raise the issue again and again,” Barkat said.

The Ombudsman is currently playing a major role in the new university wide mediation program. The program will take place for two weekends with one week spent discussing negotiation and the second involving mediation.

As a trained mediator with experience working in the New York State court system, Barkat’s experience also includes having taught courses in conflict resolution at Columbia University for graduate students. Barkat currently teaches at Columbia with courses including Negotiation, Mediation along with Culture and conflict courses. Barkat received his Bachelor’s degree at King’s College and his Masters in Public Administration at Pace University, and is currently working toward is doctoral degree at Columbia University.

With 10 years of experience at Pace, beginning working as the Associate director of the Career services department located in the graduate center, and three years as the University ombudsman, along with helping students and staff member clients, Barkat has been involved in the Resident Assistant training program.

In advising, anyone wishing to take the career path of an Ombudsman, Barkat explained, the educational background varies in the field. Most importantly, Barkat explained, “you have to have a sense of humor.” “It is a stressful job. It has a high burn out rate, after 5-7 years most burnout and leave it. Hearing problems and keeping it confidential takes a unique person when you don’t have an outlet to share it with while trying to keep a balance in your life with the weight of concern on your shoulders, Barkat said.

In terms of formal training Barkat said that few have law degrees, many have masters and few have bachelors degrees. “The specializations are across the board, but above all you have to be able to look at different sides of an issue and be completely comfortable not sharing the information with anyone, not even your best friend,” Barkat said.

“Listening is a big part of the job. I also help cut through the bureaucracy and help my clients find the right place to go so that they don’t get bounced around as well as help people evaluate their options,” Barkat said.
“There are a lot of ways you can look at the success of the office. In the first 18 months, within the most serious cases where people had retained legal council, not one proceeded with legal action to the university. It indicates there was some resolution made that was made acceptable. Real success at a heightened level can come to a resolution. I doesn’t always happen but it can and that is the goal,” Barkat said.

The Ombuds office can be contacted at extension 1111, or by email at ombuds@pace.edu.