

Creativity, the Arts and Social Transformation (CAST) Presents:

Ombuds Design Lab

April 1, 2015
10:00pm - 2:00pm
Brandeis University
Shapiro Campus Center Art Gallery, 3rd Floor

Summary Report

Introduction:

A design lab is a process for bringing together various constituencies related to a problem, issue or possibility to think in creative ways and to design structures, processes, or expressions that lead to a more just, peaceful, resilient, and vibrant communities. In the spring of 2015, the minor in CAST supported four design labs, one of which focused on the possibility of an ombuds function at Brandeis University.

Ombuds offices can be found internationally amongst governments, corporations, and within universities. According to the International Ombuds Association, an ombudsperson is someone who assists individuals and groups to resolve a conflict or a concern. In extremely complex settings such as universities, ombuds offices are challenged to use dialogue, mediation, active listening, facilitative joint brainstorming, and other strategies to confront and attempt to resolve the many conflicts between various university community members.

This design lab was organized by three students in the Introduction to Creativity, the Arts and Social Transformation (CAST 150b) course and the Ombuds Advocacy Committee, a branch of the Heller Student Association (HSA), at the Heller School of Social Policy and Management.

At the center of this design lab was a four hour convening, a gathering of fourteen people who brought their knowledge, talents, and perspectives to devise creative approaches to the possibilities and challenges of an ombuds office at Brandeis. The participants included Brandeis students, staff and faculty, and two experts from outside of the university. This report summarizes the goals of the day, the participants, key learnings, discoveries, and questions that arose from the design lab.

Key Questions:

1. How should we structure the process of working towards an ombuds office at Brandeis so that, if we are successful, the office itself will have the requisite independence and moral authority so it can be effective?
2. What evidence of effectiveness can we rely on when making the case for ombuds offices? What would be most compelling reasons for Brandeis administrators?

3. Given that Brandeis is in a period of transition in leadership, what are constraints and opportunities of advocating for ombuds in this period?

Explanation of CAST 150B:

The Introduction to Creativity, the Arts, and Social Transformation explores how to use art as a means in moving toward social change and reconciliation. The course explores several forms of creativity and expression including oral history, the visual arts, music, dance, theater, and storytelling. In studying these art forms, students learn how to build peace, mitigate conflicts, and establish social justice. In the class, students study works by authors ranging from Mary Marshall Clark, John Paul Lederach, and Salomon Lerner-Febrés to Adrienne Rich and Audre Lorde. The class lays out a framework for the Creativity, the Arts, and Social Transformation minor, but it is also for students who study politics, peace and conflict studies, international and global studies, and the arts.

Explanation of CAST Minor:

The Creativity, the Arts, and Social Transformation minor encourages students to study the intersection of the arts and theory and practice of social change and peacebuilding. Students in the CAST minor will learn about how to impact change on society by thinking critically about the arts and developing their own projects that contribute to building peace. The CAST minor will challenge students to consider aesthetics and story when it comes to building peace by encouraging them to engage in written, visual, oral, and performing arts.

Explanation of Assignment/Roles Students Played

Three students in the CAST 150B class were chosen to assist this design lab. Their task was to research the prospects for hiring an ombuds officer at Brandeis and produce a document that summarized the needs an ombudsperson could fill at Brandeis as well as possible structures for the office. During the design lab, they also served as documenters.

Students researched the structure of an ombuds office, the effect of mediation on college campuses, the funding options for an ombuds office, and the role of an ombuds officer when approaching racial, academic, and sexual issues on campus. In their research, students interviewed faculty and staff, including Sheila McMahon, the Sexual Assault and Prevention Services Specialist.

Students also created a video, interviewing other students about when an ombuds officer would be of help at Brandeis. This video was then screened at the design lab. Overall, the students contributed to researching the options behind hiring an ombuds officer at Brandeis and expressed this in a creative form through their video.

Participants:

- Lisette Anzoategui, (Heller School, Graduate student, Facilitator)
- Lisa Boes, (Academic Services, Dean)

- Cindy Cohen, (Program in Peacebuilding and the Arts, Director, Facilitator)
- Gordie Fellman, (Sociology, Faculty)
- Nicole Hart, (Heller School, Graduate student, Facilitator)
- Darcy Kennedy, (Heller School, Graduate student)
- Jenn Largaespalda, (Undergraduate student, Documenter)
- Phoenicia Lewis (Heller School, Graduate student, Documenter)
- Dan Terris (International Center for Ethics, Justice & Public Life, Director)
- Tessa Tompkins (Heller School, Graduate student, Facilitator)
- Anonymous, Ombuds Officer based in a Boston-area university
- Anonymous, Ombuds Expert based in a Boston-area university

Key Learnings:

Characteristics of an Ombuds. According to the International Ombudsman Association (IOA), the largest international association of professional organizational Ombudsmen practitioners in the world, the cornerstone principles of the field require confidential, impartial, informal and independent assistance to individuals and groups who are experiencing conflicts or who have complaints. An ombuds officer representing a minority group can help ensure understanding related to identity-based conflicts.

Staffing. University campuses determine staffing arrangements based on need and funding. Variations include: one or more full-time and/or part-time staff ombuds, one or more faculty ombuds who is/are retired and/or on term appointments, and students who serve in the ombuds role. The ombuds expert visiting our design lab strongly emphasized the value of hiring a full time, trained ombuds officer.

Reporting Structure. If the ombuds is to deal effectively with the complexities of the college or university within the context of the campus culture (without minimizing the office's impact on specific administrative units), reporting to the highest level best supports its mission. When the reporting relationship is not to the highest level but, instead, to a specific administrative area, the perception of the ombuds' neutrality and independence may be at risk. It is also necessary to ensure that there is no retaliation or consequences for visitors or witnesses who attend the office.

Constituencies Served. Ideally should assist all constituencies including students, staff, faculty, administration, etc. on their campuses.

Accessibility and Physical Location. The ombuds office must be functioning 365 days out of the year in order to ensure accessibility. It is important that the office is available and advertised through word of mouth. This is the only way to advertise the ombuds office to maintain its neutrality. Ombuds offices should be centrally located in space that allows entry and exit with a minimum of visibility by others to protect visitor anonymity.

Cost-effectiveness. Conflict is inevitable and can be expensive. The normal alternatives for dealing with conflicts are administrative hearings, formal grievances, or lawsuits. All of these options drain institutional resources. It is more expensive for administrators to spend their time attempting to resolve disputes than it is for an ombuds who is trained in conflict resolution,

communication, mediation and alternative dispute methods. Due to confidentiality issues, documenting cost effectiveness is a challenge for ombuds offices. One important indicator of cost-effectiveness is use. One ombuds expert stated in the 40 years they have worked as an ombuds officer 365 days a year, they have only had three days where they did not receive communication from clients/visitors.

Neutrality. Ombuds offices assert independence and report to chief executive offices according to International Ombudsman Association standards. The neutrality of the office needs to be maintained through a number of mechanisms and structural characteristics. The ombuds office must appear and be independent for the administration, faculty, and students to be interested in supporting its creation on campus. Since management power remains with the administration, ombuds officers cannot fix things but rather, mediate conflicts and grievances.

Ideas/Recommendations for the process of creating support for an ombuds function:

- Find allies in all cohorts: Graduate students, support staff, subsets of faculty, people of color, LGBTQ+, members of a wide range of religions
- Begin widespread discussions
- Organize support from Brandeis' Human Resources department
- Develop support from faculty members before formally approaching other faculty members
- Create a forum to ask for feedback on the possibility of implementing an ombuds office
- Pilot: Determine if the ombuds office will be effective
- Discuss who the leaders can be, such as a University Advisory Council, Faculty Diversity Committee, Brandeis Pluralism Alliance, Faculty Senate
- Effectiveness: Judge effectiveness based off of whether *pilot* it is functioning after 6-12 months

References:

"The International Ombudsman Association - Home." *The International Ombudsman Association - Home*. N.p., n.d. Web. 23 Apr. 2015.
<https://www.ombudsassociation.org/home.aspx>

Anzoategui, L. Rengifo Alvarez, N. Sang, C. Tompkins, T. (2014). *Addressing Conflict in Higher Education: Mediation and Processes of University Ombuds Offices*. Heller School of Social Policy and Management - Coexistence and Conflict.