Five questions for Tom Sebok[1]

Where would you turn if you were a graduate student who believes you have been mistreated by an adviser, but worry about retaliation if you were to file a formal complaint? Who would listen to you? Who would help you figure out the options available to you? Who could you trust to keep what you said confidential?

At the University of Colorado Boulder, you could meet with someone from the Ombuds Office, who, no matter the issue, could help you identify and weigh your options and help you navigate those difficult and important decisions.

“The diversity of our constituents and the range of their concerns can be breathtaking,” said Tom Sebok, who, since 1992, has served as director of the ombuds office. “Our knowledge about the university allows us to provide what I think of as ‘CU Boulder-specific conflict coaching.’ Sometimes we make referrals. And, occasionally, we mediate between conflicting parties.”

Before coming to CU in 1990, Sebok had worked as a counselor for more than 10 years in community colleges in Pennsylvania, New Jersey and Maryland. Two good friends, Paul and Susan Hobson-Panico, both worked at CU and Sebok had visited them a number of times.

“I really loved counseling work, but when Susan, who was the director of the ombuds office at the time, told me about an opening for the associate ombuds position, I was so in love with Colorado and especially Boulder that I was willing to try something new just for the opportunity to live here.”

After two years in that position, he became director of the ombuds office. While his job entails some administrative work, and ensuring the office follows the International Ombudsman Association (IOA) Standards of Practice to ensure confidentiality as well as impartiality, Sebok has spent much of his time doing ombuds work.

Now, after 25 years at the university and an extensive portfolio of publications, workshops and new initiatives, Sebok will retire this December.

“I plan to spend much more time in my small, home recording studio, writing and recording music,” he said. “Paul Panico (who is nearing retirement, too) and I are considering starting a band. Also, I’d like to improve my guitar-playing skills! My partner and I hope to travel more often to visit her young grandchildren who live on the East Coast. And, I’d love to visit New Zealand, Alaska and Hawaii. Finally, I also hope to remain connected to my terrific ombuds colleagues – especially those in Colorado.”

1. How has the role of ombuds changed over the years since you became director of the office? Have the issues changed?

The kinds of issues are still very similar, but since the addition of Faculty Ombuds to our office in 1997, many more faculty members now ask for our help. Both faculty and staff tend to request help most often for dealing with interpersonal disputes; students still tend to need help navigating the university bureaucracy. Back in 1990, we had no standards of practice. We do now and, somewhat as a result of this, our role has changed in several important ways.

The original “classical ombudsman” role developed in Sweden in the early 1800s was an independent investigator of complaints about the government. These investigators functioned as “watchdogs” and “critics” of the government. Their focus was on identifying and rooting out “maladministration.” As I interacted with colleagues around the country, I eventually realized that since the mid-1980s within United States higher education, a new model – the “organizational ombuds” model – had begun to take root.

The focus shifted away from an investigator, watchdog and critic role to a facilitating, coaching and problem-solving one. Of course, this change came with a trade-off. Although we still talk informally with decision makers and try to help resolve concerns about perceived unfairness (e.g., whether or how existing procedures were followed or apply, the need to communicate expectations clearly and in a timely manner, flexibility in applying policies, etc.), we no longer

formally investigate allegations of “maladministration” which, of course, is sometimes necessary in any large organization. By using tools like mediation, conflict coaching and providing targeted information to help people navigate their decisions and our bureaucracy, we probably help more people with a wider range of concerns.

Another change since 1990 has involved the legal climate. Organizational ombuds have never had “shield laws” legally guaranteeing us the right to follow the confidentiality our own standards of practice require. Individual employers are free to establish a confidential resource like ours, but without shield laws, confidentiality is open to challenges on a case-by-case basis. Fortunately, in my 25 years – despite several attempts – I have never been required to violate confidentiality. In the few cases where someone has tried to compel our testimony, we have been protected by having outside counsel (or university counsel) successfully argue to a judge that our work is confidential and we should not have to testify. So we have what might be best described as a common-law privilege.

Recently, Title IX concerns have led to additional discussions about the limits of our confidentiality. But, with the support of the administration, all ombuds within the CU system, like those in the University of California system and those at many other leading private and public universities, still serve as confidential resources and are not required to report allegations made by those seeking our help. I should add that like psychologists, counselors, etc., one important exception to our confidentiality is “imminent risk of serious harm.” Fortunately, I have only faced that once in 25 years when two of us were concerned about the welfare of a graduate student.

Finally, as we search for a new director, it has also become very clear that the field has changed. There are now many more experienced ombuds in the pool than when I applied for the associate ombuds role in 1990. I don’t think anyone in that pool had prior ombuds experience. In addition to ombuds experience, some of the candidates today also have advanced degrees in fields like dispute resolution. This gives them an academic underpinning for their on-the-job experiences. Finally, one of the preferred qualifications for the director position now is something that has only existed for the last five or so years – certification as an organizational ombudsman practitioner.

2. Why is an ombuds office still important to the university community even in a time of increasing awareness and more programs to address some of the issues you might be called on to handle?

There are a lot of reasons. People in vulnerable (low-power) positions (e.g., graduate students perceiving mistreatment by an adviser) often don’t want to make formal complaints because they fear retaliation – even if a process exists. A colleague of mine at Oregon State University recently told me that even though they now have an anti-bullying policy there with investigative procedures, a number of people still fear making a formal complaint. Of course, people who don’t get any help with serious concerns can face multiple negative consequences, as well. An ombuds office gives them a safe place to “think out loud” about their concerns and consider a range of options for dealing with them. Without any pressure from us, sometimes the information we provide helps people decide to pursue making a formal complaint. But, if they make this choice, they do so after receiving more and better information and they often have a clearer idea about what to expect. Actually, that is usually true regardless of the choice they make.

Even when formal complaints are made, the behaviors described might not technically constitute a policy violation. A common example is people who feel they are in a “hostile work environment” but not because of their membership in a “protected class” (e.g., race, gender, religion, etc.). I’ve spoken with investigators who also find this frustrating because they understand that because behaviors aren’t a policy violation, what is happening may still be unfair, painful, scary and/or infuriating, etc. Again, the ombuds office is a safe place for people in this situation to think about things like whether, how, with whom, and when they will address the problem.

Another reason an ombuds office is still important despite specialized programs is its ability to communicate with those who formally investigate. We often call investigators with “hypothetical” questions to assist our visitors in understanding more about the criteria used to determine policy violations, etc. In one situation, with an investigator’s consent, I used my speaker phone to allow a visitor to hear the investigator’s responses to questions for which a visitor wanted answers – without requiring the visitor to speak or be identified. I felt great about facilitating this kind of collaboration because it helped the visitor gain useful information the investigator would not have otherwise had the opportunity to directly provide.

3. What would you consider some of your favorite achievements during your time at CU?

I am very glad to have been one of a small group of people who helped to establish the campus Restorative Justice program in the late 1990s.

In 1993, Guy and Heidi Burgess of the Conflict Research Consortium asked me to speak on a panel about things I had observed disputants in mediation do that either elicited cooperation or resistance from the other party. What a gift! Eventually, I wrote a few articles that grew out of this question, including one in 2002 called “Preparing for Your Mediation” on the website www.mediate.com[2]. Last year the editor told me that of the more than 10,000 articles published there on any given week, “Preparing for Your Mediation” is often among their top 50 most-viewed articles.

I am also glad to have followed the Boulder Faculty Assembly’s recommendation and helped establish Faculty Ombuds services within our office. Our use of distinguished emeritus faculty members to provide ombuds services to faculty has led many more faculty members to use our services. And I believe the collaboration with these outstanding faculty colleagues has added value to what the Ombuds Office offers to the entire university community.

I’ve now published about 20 articles in ombuds journals and made at least that many presentations at annual conferences. I served on two journal editorial boards and on the Boards of Directors of two ombuds professional organizations. I helped teach an IOA course for new and aspiring organizational ombuds for five years. All of these activities allowed me to grow professionally and, eventually, to “give back” by mentoring new ombuds colleagues.

Currently I am writing a “history of the CU-Boulder Ombuds Office” which I hope to publish in an ombuds journal later this fall. Learning about our early history and reflecting upon my own career has been a fascinating experience.

4. Do you feel as if there is “unfinished business” at the university as you prepare to leave?

Yes. From my first year on the job, I began hearing about what many have referred to as “workplace bullying.” I soon came to realize that ombuds offices are magnets for these complaints in universities all over the world. It’s a tough issue for many reasons. People have genuinely different perceptions, sensitivities to and understanding of the concept. What some see as bullying is viewed by others as “being direct” or having “high standards.”

Free speech and academic freedom concerns quickly arise when universities consider developing policies and procedures to deal with this issue. I have been involved in bringing bystander training to the campus to help empower those who observe this kind of unacceptable conduct but don’t know what to do about it. And in the last few years I have given multiple “Promoting a Respectful Workplace” workshops here and elsewhere.

The Boulder Staff Council passed a resolution this year calling for the administration to consider developing an anti-bullying policy. A task force on the Boulder campus is looking at climate issues (including bullying and other abuses of power) affecting graduate students.

In the past three years, I’ve become involved in a new organization called the Consortium on Abrasive Conduct in Higher Education (CACHE). It involves ombuds, human resources, academic researchers and university administrators from all over the country who are concerned about “abrasive conduct” within United States universities. CACHE now has a website dedicated to “promising practices” to help institutions of higher education deal with this problem (http://www.cacheconsortium.org/[3]). No doubt, much of this work will continue after I retire.

5. What are some favorite memories of your time at the university?

There are many. Coming from a small community college with no football team, I was amazed my first week on the job to visit Folsom Field and see the Buffs defeat Stanford – in a game that was actually televised on ESPN!

In 2001, Geoffrey Wallace, an ombuds colleague from the University of California Santa Barbara who was friends with the musician, Jim Messina (Loggins and Messina, Poco, Buffalo Springfield), arranged for me to play with Messina and two other musicians at a small ombuds conference at Asilomar near Monterey, California. That was a peak life experience!

Seeing President Barack Obama at the Coors Events Center on April 20, 2012, was another thrill I'll never forget.

I was extremely honored to give a keynote address at the IOA annual conference in 2014.

And I'm hoping my retirement party on Dec. 4 from 3 p.m. to 5 p.m. in the C4C Flatirons Room will be yet another "favorite memory"!

Staff Council clarifies membership bylaws[4]

The University of Colorado Staff Council (UCSC) amended its bylaws to more accurately represent the current composition and processes of the organization during its monthly meeting Oct. 15 at the CU Anschutz Medical Campus.

The rules governing the council had not been revised since 2011, and council voted to clarify language, including membership references. The previous bylaws only recognized classified members, and so the wording was changed to specify both classified and university staff employees.

Council members also discussed whether it would be appropriate or feasible to make it mandatory in the bylaws that the Staff Council include a certain number of classified employees or professional research assistants (PRAs) in its membership.

The CU Anschutz staff council found that PRAs were "not covered" by any council and were "outliers," said council member Jennifer Smith. The Anschutz council voted to include them in its membership; however, Boulder-affiliated PRAs are eligible to join that campus's faculty council.

Because of the inconsistencies of council bylaws regarding membership across the varying campus councils, UCSC voted not to include language regarding PRAs in the bylaws.

Members also decided that the bylaws should not specify that Staff Council include a certain number of classified employees in its membership.

Phillip Petty, Denver campus, said it is important for classified employees to have a voice in the process and that the UCSC should have a balanced membership.

While other council members agreed, they also said that in some areas of the university, the total number of classified employees is dwindling and a relatively few of those have shown interest in joining campus councils. UCSC members agreed that it is more important to have active, engaged members than to satisfy a quota with a membership that is not fully committed to serving the university through the council.

"(Our bylaws) make the best attempt at equality across categories because we don't have control" of who runs for council seats, Smith said.

"I don't think we want to lock ourselves in to a specific number of certain members," said Denise Thomas, council chair. "All the information (about issues) should be feeding into the campus councils and then feeding up to here, so whether you have a university staff representative or classified representative that sits on this council, all the concerns – whether they deal with classified or not – should be funneled to us so we can bring it up with administration or the regents. Our role is to represent all staff, whether they are classified or university staff."

In other business:
Members of the Professional Development Committee will develop questions for a potential university-wide survey that

would delve into the issue of staff development. Council members want to accurately measure what types of development opportunities are available and employee preferences surrounding learning methods.
Staff Council members have been researching the issue for several months but want real data to present their case to administration for more and consistent professional development.

“We feel that the best way to get the pulse on what currently exists for staff in their areas on the four campuses” is through a survey, said Joanna Iturbe, Boulder campus. “We know inconsistencies exist, but we need to know just what we are dealing with. It is drastically inconsistent, not just on the four campuses, but within buildings.”

Iturbe said the survey would measure numerous things: outside of Skillsoft, what is available for employees; how is professional development funded and does the employee have to pay for opportunities; what is the preferred method of professional development; must employees take personal time off or administrative leave; and do employees prefer night or weekend classes, online or in person.

Because the Board of Regents has expressed interest in understanding employment issues confronting university staff members, UCSC will ask the board to conduct the survey or offer assistance with the survey. In addition to the professional development questions, the committee said any survey could also include other issues of importance to the staff, such as a university-wide bullying policy and a more consistent tuition benefit across campuses.

“I would love for (the survey) to come from the regents (and be sent) to all staff on all four campuses. That would be how they can help us because we could mine that data and give them some deliverables,” Iturbe said.

Council will invite Kyle Hybl, regent chair, to council’s Nov. 19 meeting for an open dialogue on the proposed survey and other topics.
Council also has invited Tony DeCrosta, chief plan administrator for the University of Colorado Health and Welfare Trust, to the same meeting to discuss the Trust and university insurance policy offerings. Council members have been fielding questions from constituents concerning health policies and Trust processes and will pose those questions to DeCrosta. Members also discussed “years of service” recognition for employees and the issues surrounding accurately counting the length of time each employee has worked for the university, including hours worked as student employees. Some constituents incorrectly think the “years of service” awards are connected to retirement or wages; however, the program strictly is for recognition. The Service Excellence Awards Committee has finalized its plan to streamline the nominating process for the annual awards that are presented to one person from each campus and system administration exhibiting exemplary service to their university and home communities. The council committee will now develop an improved rubric with which to choose winners from the nominations received. A call for award nominations will begin in late November and awards will be handed out in April.

CU Tech Transfer launches 13 new startups[5]

Delivering research breakthroughs from the University of Colorado to the marketplace, CU’s Office of Technology Transfer[6] collaborated to advance 13 new startup companies during the last fiscal year.

With these recent additions, research commercialization at CU now has led to the creation of 155 companies and an estimated 500 jobs since 1994. The CU Tech Transfer Office facilitates patents and provides other commercialization support to researchers at the university’s four campuses. The office also serves as a liaison for industry partners interested in commercializing technologies first developed at CU.

“The discoveries coming out of CU’s world-class research program continue to attract top management talent and capital,” said Kate Tallman, associate vice president of the CU Technology Transfer Office. “We are fortunate to work with a growing group of business-savvy faculty who can partner effectively with entrepreneurs in our community to take their ideas to commercial reality.”

Among CU’s Tech Transfer success stories from the 2015 fiscal year are the launches of Click Nucleic Acids Inc. and Orbital Micro Systems, both of which took root at CU-Boulder.

At **Click Nucleic Acids Inc.**[7]**,** CU-Boulder's Christopher Bowman, Ph.D., has developed a novel DNA analog identified as click nucleic acids (CNA). CNA can mimic the DNA property to specifically associate with complementary nucleic acid materials – including DNA, RNA and PNA – but with greater binding specificities and selectivity. The Boulder-based company is developing CNA for applications currently utilizing DNA, RNA and PNA, such as anti-sense gene therapeutics, bio-detection and genomic arrays, with a focus on gene-silencing therapy for treatment of Huntington's Disease and other trinucleotide repeat disorders. The company recently presented its work at the 2015 Rocky Mountain Life Science Investor and Partnering Conference in Vail, Colorado.

Orbital Micro Systems,[8] a Boulder-based weather data company, provides 15-minute revisit weather observations to drive near-real time decision making in the risk mitigation, transportation and agriculture industries. OMS is commercializing a CU-Boulder exclusively licensed cloud-penetrating microwave radiometer that enables worldwide weather data collection at twice the spatial resolution, 25 times the temporal resolution and six times the sensitivity at a fraction of the cost of existing government and commercial systems. Research and development was led by CU-Boulder's Al Gasiewski, Ph.D. (National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration/CU Center for Environmental Technology) and Brian Sanders (Colorado Space Grant Consortium).

Science and business leaders at these and other CU startups that took root over the past year now look to build toward the future. **ARCA biopharma**[9]**,** a Westminster, Colorado-based developer of genetically targeted therapies for cardiovascular disease, got its start in similar fashion. With beginnings at the CU Anschutz Medical Campus, the company was founded on the belief that a personalized medicine approach to drug development, tailoring medical treatment to a patient's individual genetic characteristics, can enable more effective therapies, improve patient outcomes and reduce health care costs.

The pharmacogenetic approach to drug development and the intellectual property behind ARCA biopharma was developed by the CU School of Medicine's Michael Bristow, M.D., Ph.D., the founder and CEO of ARCA. Today, the company's lead product, Gencaro, is in clinical trials for atrial fibrillation prevention and recently attracted $37 million in funding. A paper on the product recently was presented at the 19th Annual Scientific Meeting of the Heart Failure Society of America in Washington, D.C.

CU scientists to engage public Oct. 24 through hands-on demos, conversations[10]

October forum to delve into education cost factors[11]

David Engelke discuses role as new graduate school dean[12]

Preview Day posts record turnout[13]

Boulder Staff Council, Athletics work together on staff appreciation events[14]
[15]

What does appreciation for a job well done look like to you? Studies show that when it comes to being appreciated, employees can have varying preferences from bonuses to recognition, private and/or public, to genuine “Thank You” and everything in between.

The Boulder Staff Council Awards and Recognition Committee (ASR) for the last three years has been focusing on multiple ways to expand employee recognition on the Boulder campus. ASR has partnered with Kyle Geddes from the Athletic Department in working together to focus and promote Staff Recognition. Athletics has been a key player with recognizing the Chancellor’s Employees of the Year Awardees during a halftime event at the Faculty and Staff Appreciation Women’s Basketball Game. This event not only has been an acknowledgement of the awardees, but the event also provided the winners two courtside seats, center-court halftime acknowledgment and offering staff employees a package deal at a 30 percent discount.

Besides this special acknowledgement, Athletics has been very supportive of other Staff Council events by having coaches and spirit squad members attend, donating door prizes and offering staff discounts to various events. Athletics has been a good partner in recognizing and thanking staff for their work on the campus through very visible events. ASR and Athletics continue to work together for other creative means to recognize our Boulder staff.

With ASR’s mission being expanded to include staff recognition, partnerships such as the one with Athletics have been a positive way to acknowledge staff for their outstanding accomplishments. ASR plans on expanding its partnering opportunities with other departments to offer more variety of ways to acknowledge staff.

In line with this, ASR and Athletics have two upcoming events for staff:

Nov. 12 Volleyball Match vs. ASU:
Discounted tickets with a voucher for discounted concession items
Jan. 22 Women’s Basketball Game vs. Oregon:
Discounted ticket and concession items. Recognize all staff during game. Recognize Chancellor’s Employees of the Year Awardees at half-time.
In addition to these events, the campus has many opportunities to nominate other staff members in our community for various recognition and awards. Sometimes this process can be overwhelming and time consuming. If you would like to nominate someone and are needing assistance with the process, ASR members can help you maneuver through the paperwork.

ASR is always looking for new ways to expand this program. So if you have any suggestions on ways to recognize staff that don’t require a major infusion of cash please let us know. We can be reached at scouncil@colorado.edu[16] or check us out on our website: www.colorado.edu/staffcouncil[17]

You do not have to be a member of Staff Council to serve on any of our many committees. For more information or to contact us, visit www.colorado.edu/staffcouncil[17]

Herrera to discuss Latino political engagement[18]

Andrea Herrera, professor, Women’s and Ethnic Studies Program, will be part of an Oct. 22 panel discussion about Latino political engagement.

Matthews, Akuthota give lectureships in Boston [19]

Dennis Matthews, MD, and Venu Akuthota, MD, chair and vice chair respectively of the Department of Physical

Medicine and Rehabilitation, each gave named lectureships at the American Academy of Physical Medicine and Rehabilitation's Annual Assembly in Boston. Dennis received the 2014 Gabriella E. Molnar, MD, Pediatric PM&RLifetime Achievement Award and delivered the lecture at this year's meeting.

CU-Boulder staff tour new athletics facilities at open house[20]

Athletics and Boulder Staff Council recently teamed up to host an open house tour of the new facilities at Folsom Field. One longtime staff member recalled the open house when Dal Ward was built; she said at that time we thought Dal Ward was really amazing, but this new facility goes way beyond Dal Ward. Another stated that the new facility is the right combination of state-of-the-art tools, housed by a building honoring past accomplishments and CU's traditional look.

Staff initially gathered in the Byron R. White Club Level on the east side of Folsom Field. The tours were kicked off by Athletic Director Rick George, who provided an overview of the facility and Athletic Department goals to the initial crowd of about 150 staff. Staff Council and Spirit Squad members were positioned around the facility to direct staff through the tour and keep people from getting lost. One of the favorite spots was the rooftop terrace featuring amazing views of campus and the mountains.

Colorado Law Fair[21]

Over 100 law schools will attend. Representative will include deans of admissions and directors to visit with our students interested in pursuing a legal education.

At noon, Mimi Huang will give a special presentation on "The Law School Application Process and Financing your Legal Education."

The event is sponsored by the University of Colorado Prelaw Office, Phi Alpha Delta Legal Fraternity and the Western Association of Prelaw Advisors.

More information: http://www.colorado.edu/advising/pre-law[22]

Arrests for drugs, alcohol continue to go down at CU-Boulder[23]

Boulder Takes Rare Step Into Conservative Orbit With G.O.P. Debate[24]

Islands around Anschutz in Aurora begin filling in[25]

Links
[1] https://connections.cu.edu/spotlights/five-questions-tom-sebok[2] http://www.mediate.com/[3] http://www.cacheconsortium.org/[4] https://connections.cu.edu/stories/staff-council-clarifies-membership-bylaws[5] https://connections.cu.edu/stories/cu-tech-transfer-launches-13-new-startups[6] http://www.cu.edu/technology-transfer-office[7] http://www.clicknainc.com/[8] http://www.orbitalmicro.com/[9] http://www.arcabiopharma.com/[10] https://connections.cu.edu/stories/cu-scientists-engage-public-oct-24-through-hands-demos-conversations[11] https://connections.cu.edu/stories/october-forum-delve-education-cost-factors[12] https://connections.cu.edu/stories/david-engelke-discuses-role-new-graduate-school-dean[13] https://connections.cu.edu/stories/preview-day-posts-record-turnout[14] https://connections.cu.edu/stories/boulder-staff-council-athletics-work-together-staff-appreciation-events[15] https://connections.cu.edu/sites/default/files/ucb-staff-cncl_athletics_top.jpg[16] mailto:scouncil@colorado.edu[17] http://www.colorado.edu/staffcouncil[18] https://connections.cu.edu/people/herrera-discuss-latino-political-engagement[19] https://connections.cu.edu/people/matthews-akuthota-give-lectureships-boston[20] https://connections.cu.edu/people/cu-boulder-staff-tour-new-athletics-facilities-open-house[21] https://connections.cu.edu/events/colorado-law-fair[22] http://www.colorado.edu/advising/pre-law[23] https://connections.cu.edu/itn/arrests-drugs-alcohol-continue-go-down-cu-boulder[24] https://connections.cu.edu/itn/boulder-takes-rare-step-conservative-orbit-gop-debate[25] https://connections.cu.edu/itn/islands-around-anschutz-aurora-begin-filling