

Ombuds Office Columbia University

Making a Record

People contacting the Ombuds Office sometimes say they wish to "go on record," to make a formal, dated report that might be useful to them or to others in the future.

The Ombuds Office does not keep case records or "paper trails" for the University or any people affiliated with it--there are no files of individually identifiable information. (Temporary notes are shredded as soon as a case is resolved; only anonymous aggregate statistics of patterns and categories of concerns are maintained.) The International Ombudsman Association asserts that contacting the Ombuds Office does not put the University or employer on "notice."

There are many alternative ways to make a contemporary record. The most common format is a dated written account, composed as soon after the incident (s) as possible, with attention to times, dates, locations, names of primary parties and other people present (if any), chronology of events, exact words used, and other specific facts. It's a good idea to keep a copy in an accessible but discreet location. The original may be sealed (to indicate that it has not been altered) and/or filed in someone else's custody. For example, it might be kept on file in University offices of record, such as Equal Opportunity and Affirmative Action, Human Resources, Security, deans, or other administrators. It could also be held by an outsider -- the police department, your lawyer, a medical counselor or another trusted acquaintance.

An easy and confidential way to make a dated record is to mail it to yourself through the U.S. Post Office -- certified mail if you wish to be especially careful, and after you receive it with the postmark date, keep it sealed. Or, for an ongoing series of events, you could keep a log in a dated, bound logbook the kind used to maintain scientific research data). You could also email the account of the incident (s) to yourself or to someone else, thus keeping the dateline of the email transmission to help affirm the record. Other media can be used: you might make a recording on audio tape or video tape, also sent by certified mail and retained in the sealed, dated envelope.

Whenever you decide to retain a document or other materials sealed as evidence of the date they were assembled or composed, remember to keep readily available a copy, so you can confirm (in case you don't remember) the exact contents that you have sealed. Chances are, a satisfactory resolution will be achieved so you will not need to provide formal contemporary evidence. But in the meantime, having kept a dated record may give you peace of mind.