

Kathy Canul: Journal Ombudsperson

Jonathan Schultz

An Ombudsperson (or Ombuds) exists to help resolve disputes in a neutral, independent way. It's a role that is common in government and journalism, but less so in scientific publishing. In 2022, when the American Chemical Society (ACS) Publications sought to create the role of ombudsperson as part of their "commitments to addressing systemic racism in chemistry journals," they turned to Kathy Canul, an ombudsperson for the University of California system for over 20 years. As described by ACS,¹ an ombudsperson serves as "an independent, impartial, off-the-record, and confidential channel for concerns regarding the peer-review process."

Recently, Kathy Canul and Shaina Lange, Senior Manager in the ACS Publishing Integrity Office, spoke with *Science Editor* about the role of an ombudsperson and its place in promoting inclusivity and equity.

Science Editor: Let's start with the basics: What is an ombudsperson?

Kathy Canul: In brief, an ombuds is a resource available to address issues and obstacles that get in the way of an organization meeting its objectives and goals. ACS Publications wants to publish high-quality content that advances scientific knowledge. There are numerous steps in moving a research study through the submission, peer-review, and publication process, and along the way, there can be challenges in the process that may need to be addressed in order for the research to undergo a fair evaluation.

As an ombuds, I serve as an independent, neutral, and confidential resource available to hear publication concerns from authors, reviewers, and editors. I listen to the issues brought forward and if there is a means to resolve the matters informally, I work with the involved parties to create options for resolution. As a neutral resource, an ombuds doesn't take sides but rather, gathers information, much like putting pieces of a puzzle together, to get a broader perspective of the problem and arrive at resolutions. There may be times when an individual has a concern that is best



handled by a formal process or protocol, and I will redirect the person to an appropriate unit within ACS Publications to address the matter.

The resolution doesn't necessarily mean a paper is going to be published, but it can lead to a mutual understanding of why the current situation is as it is and be able to move forward. I want to emphasize that the resource is confidential. An ombudsperson does not share communications with anyone except in the rare circumstance that there is imminent harm to an individual or an immediate public safety risk. In resolving problems when possible and appropriate, I also try to bring parties together to informally resolve concerns.

SE: The ombuds role is positioned with the ACS Publications' Publishing Integrity Office but is different from an editor who handles the concerns about scientific misconduct in published articles. Can you clarify that distinction?

Canul: People can come to me with any concern, and I will make every effort to either help directly or find the right resource within ACS Publishing to assist with the issue. In some ways, I'm like a traffic cop directing people to where they need to go and helping to cut through the

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bureaucracy. Generally, when people come to ask for help, they're concerned and upset, and they want a response and resolution. I should clarify that an ombuds does not investigate complaints, determine outcomes, replace formal channels, or overturn decisions. My hope is that if an author, reviewer, or editor faces a challenge that interferes with fulfilling their roles or creates conflict or stress, they reach out and don't feel like they have to struggle on their own.

At ACS Publications, formal concerns about a specific manuscript or published article are brought to the attention of the relevant journal. Typically, the editor-in-chief of that journal is tasked with overseeing the investigation and resolution of that concern. They may work with other editors at the journal with relevant subject matter expertise and who are best positioned to evaluate scientific concerns in context with the work. They may also work with the ACS Publishing Integrity Office to ensure alignment with our ethical best practices and policies and explore various paths to resolution. The editors ultimately make a binding editorial decision.

SE: What is a typical case for you?

Canul: A typical case may involve an author whose paper has been rejected, and they have questions or concerns about the process that led to that outcome. For example, an author may perceive that there has been bias in the process or a violation of the protocol in the review of a paper leading to a belief that there has not been a fair evaluation of the work.

Sometimes concerns are related to communication between an author and an editor. I've witnessed communication exchanges where there appears to be a lack of courtesy. In haste, sometimes we lack tact that could lead to miscommunication or misunderstanding. I may address some of those interpersonal communications where people feel disrespected in their work.

SE: On the topic of bias: I thought it interesting that ACS specifically created this role as part of their commitment to addressing systemic racism and promoting inclusivity. Shaina, what led ACS Publications to create this role?

Shaina Lange: Diversity, equity, inclusion, and respect (DEIR) are long-standing core values of ACS. We strive to advance chemistry by publishing the highest quality and trusted research, which can only be achieved by providing services that are equitable and inclusive of the diverse chemistry community. In mid-2020, we sought to address a changing social justice climate by renewing and accelerating our commitment to advancing DEIR. The ombuds program came out of several commitments we made in an editorial published by all ACS journals: "Confronting Racism in Chemistry Journals".² That editorial

expressed support to historically underrepresented communities in science, acknowledged the disparities within the chemistry community and within our publishing program, and recognized that there is a lot that we don't know. We are committed to learning by listening to the chemistry community and people who are trying to engage with us as a publisher so that we may understand issues and challenges they are facing.

The ombuds program is a way for us to understand some of the root causes of those inequities and, furthermore, work to address them. The ombudsperson is asked to create an annual report and provide recommendations to us as a publisher on potential workflow changes or additional resources or trainings that might be needed based on the cases they are seeing. We then intend to take that information to make our peer-review process more equitable and inclusive for the entire chemistry community.

Creating the program itself was the work of many of ACS colleagues. After months of my colleagues working with the International Ombudsman Association and our legal team, they developed a charter for the Ombuds program including standards of operation, position scope, and procedures around accountability and reporting. We placed a call for proposals in mid-2021 and appointed Dr Canul that October.

SE: In research for this interview, I saw that "ombudsman" is a Swedish word meaning "representative". It's clear that you are approaching this as a representative of the outsider: the reader, the author, or whoever has the concern; that you are going to act on their behalf to make sure those concerns are addressed appropriately by the appropriate party.

Canul: Exactly, but I need to clarify that an ombuds is not an advocate for a particular person. An ombuds is an advocate for fairness, equity, and justice. My responsibility is to hear all sides of a matter and envision viable options for solving the conflict.

Regarding diversity, we know that science is always better when you get a wide range of ideas and viewpoints in both the discovery of new knowledge as well as problem solving. The more we learn about the diverse group of people that make up ACS Publications community, the better ACS will be as an organization in its effort to create a sense of inclusion, belonging and community.

SE: What has been the most surprising or interesting insight you've had from the first year in this position?

Canul: There are a couple of things. The first one that surprised me is that authors are not complaining about their paper not being accepted for publication. The concerns lie more in feeling disrespected when authors explore and
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question the review process. For many scientists—actually for many employees within any discipline—work becomes a large part of our identity. When the work is rejected, we can feel rejected as a person. Scientists search for answers and explanations and expect clear and reasonable responses to their queries. When this doesn't happen, it can be a disappointing and frustrating experience.

I also expected that there would be more issues related to equity surrounding race, ethnicity, or gender. I imagine these concerns exist, and I need to continue to engage in outreach efforts and earn the trust of the ACS Publications community to create a safe space to address these important challenges.

Lastly, I didn't realize how people could be so passionate about chemistry. People love what they do. I'm used to working with a variety of disciplines, but to see people so enamored with their work and the time and attention they put into it is inspiring. I am grateful for this hard work as we are benefactors of these efforts of discovery within chemistry.

SE: You've been an ombudsperson for a while, even before joining ACS. What led you to that profession and what are the skills that you need to be an ombuds?

Canul: My career of over 30 years has been within the University of California system where I started out as a Clinical Psychologist counseling students and later faculty and

staff. Simultaneously, I taught undergraduate and graduate students and worked on my own research. I felt that I had an understanding of many roles within higher education as well as how school and work problems can lead to low morale and even emotional distress. It saddens me that for many people, work has not been a place of recognition or productivity but rather a stressful and painful experience. As an ombuds, I am gratified to explore solutions to problems and also make a difference in addressing systemic concerns within an organization.

An ombuds role requires patience, a nonjudgmental perspective, empathy, good listening skills, and compassion for the people you serve.

SE: What advice do you have for journals and organizations that would want to add an ombudsperson?

Canul: Resources such as an ombuds demonstrate a concern for community members and help build a sense of safety and trust. Members may feel recognized, seen, and heard. If you have a place for people to share their discontent, worries, and frustrations, there is a chance problematic issues can be addressed and resolved at the individual and organizational level.

References and Links

1. <https://axial.acs.org/2021/11/11/ombudsperson/>
 2. <https://pubs.acs.org/doi/10.1021/acsami.0c10979>
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