	**California Caucus of College and University Ombuds** **53rd Annual Conference** ***The Grove and the Understory*** Asilomar Conference Center, Pacific Grove, CA November 8th-11th, 2026
All activities will occur in the Fred Farr Room unless specified.	
Sunday, November 8, 2026	
4:00 - 6:00 PM	**Conference registration**: located in Fred Farr Room check-in: at Asilomar Front Desk
6:00 - 7:00 PM	**Dinner** Location: Fred Farr Room
7:00 - 8:30 PM	**Brief Welcome, Introductions & Dessert**
Monday, November 9, 2026	
7:30 - 8:30 AM	**Breakfast** Location: Crocker Dining Hall
8:45 - 9:00 AM	**Opening Remarks** Co-Convenors: Natalie Gibson & Serena Young
9:00 - 9:15 AM	**Opening Mini-Circles** Facilitators: Natalie Fleury & Brenda Berlin
9:15 - 10:15 AM	**Session 1**: Jenn Mahony, *The Grove of Time Intertwined: Finding our Future in the Roots of our Ombudsing Understory*
10:15 - 10:30 AM	**Break**
10:30 - 11:45 AM	**Session 2**: Joan Waters & Kevin Coonrod, *Duck and Cover: The Role of an Academic Ombuds in 2026*
12:00 - 1:00 PM	**Lunch** Location: Crocker Dining Hall

1:15 - 1:45 PM	**Session 3:** Programming Committee**,** *Refreshing Our Understory*
1:45 - 2:15 PM	**Session 4:** Jen Amano, *Upholding Impartiality while Rooted in Empathy*
2:15 - 3:00 PM	**Session 5:** Programming Committee, *Entangled in the Understory: Challenges to Ombuds Empathy and Impartiality (Case Studies)*
3:00 - 3:15 PM	**Break**
3:15 - 4:15 PM	**Session 6:** Bryan Hanson, *Strengthening the Canopy: Reflective Practice and Resilience in Ombuds Work*
4:15 - 4:30 PM	**Daily Evaluation & Small Caucus Sign ups**
6:00 - 7:00 PM	**Dinner** Location: Crocker Dining Hall
7:00 - 9:00 PM	**Community Building Activities:** Join with fellow Ombuds for games, crafts, conversation and connection
Tuesday, November 10, 2026	
7:30 - 8:30 AM	**Breakfast** Location: Crocker Dining Hall
8:45 - 9:00 AM	**Announcements**
9:00 - 10:15 AM	**Session 7**: Matt Ricke, *The Understory Speaks: Folklore, Myth and the Hidden Life of Organizational Conflict*
10:15-10:30 AM	**Break**
10:30-11:45 AM	**Session 8:** Kathie Greenwood, *Navigating Deep Rooted Organizational Conflicts: A "Tree-Layered" Case Study*
11:45 AM - 12:00 PM	**Evaluations & Group Photo**

12:00-1:00 PM	**Lunch** Location: Crocker Dining Hall
1:00 - 5:00 PM	**Caucus and Small Group Discussions** This session provides time for self- and small group reflection, and for networking with colleagues. Groups form around shared interests in a topic and/or activity.
6:00 - 7:00 PM	**Dinner** Location: Crocker Dining Hall
7:30 - 9:00 PM	**Gift Exchange** Location: Fred Farr This Cal Caucus tradition provides an entertaining way to learn more about your colleagues. Bring a wrapped gift (to keep it a surprise) that represents a passion or interest in your life. *Around $25*.

Wednesday, November 11, 2026	
7:30 - 8:30 AM	**Breakfast** Location: Crocker Dining Hall
8:45 - 9:00 AM	**Announcements**
9:00 - 10:00 AM	**Session 9:** Cindy Mazur, *How Can Nature and Forest Therapy Enrich and Inform our Ombuds Practice*
10:00 – 10:30 AM	**Closing Circles**
10:30 - 10:45 AM	**Evaluations & Caucus Conclusion**
10:45 - 11:00 AM	**Break**
11:00 - 11:30 AM	**Cal Caucus Debrief and Planning Meeting** Please take advantage of this opportunity to share your feedback and ideas to help shape the direction of the next caucus
11:30 AM - 12:00 PM	**Cal Caucus Annual Business Meeting** Everyone is welcome!

Brief Session Abstracts & Learning Objectives:

Session 1: **Jenn Mahony, *The Grove of Time Intertwined: Finding our Future in the Roots of our Ombudsing Understory:*** What stories have we told ourselves for so long – individually and as a profession—that we have forgotten why they exist and whether they sustain our future? Using a mix of shared storytelling, reflection, and provocative discussion, participants will gain new insights about (a) their understanding of fundamental ombudsing concepts; (b) fundamental values at work; and (c) identify individual values and norms. Key takeaways include (1) deepening understanding of self to think about how that influences choices we make as ombuds; (2) rethinking fundamental aspects of Ombuds work to influence how we might reconsider office accessibility and visitor risk; (3) deepening our roots with each other; and (4) further building our collective systems that allow us to be guardians of our shared stillness.

Session 2: **Joan Waters & Kevin Coonrod, *Duck and Cover: The Role of an Academic Ombuds in 2026:*** This interactive presentation will provide an examination of recent enactment and application of federal and state laws, as well as strategic economic leverage applied toward higher educational institutions, and how those changes impact the work of the academic ombuds from the perspectives of two veteran ombuds at large public and private universities. Academia is undergoing changes in First Amendment rights of speech, tenure, academic freedom and shared governance, and the application of economic leverage to provoke specific results. Through presentation and group discussion this session will impart a sense of the damage these changes are making on academic institutions and ways in which ombuds may work with office visitors who are frightened and uncertain about what they can and cannot say in public.

Session 3: Programming Committee, *Refreshing Our Understory:* We will engage in a short interactive icebreaker session together and consider how we might integrate similar sessions in our work as Ombuds facilitating groups.

Session 4: Jen Amano, *Upholding Impartiality while Rooted in Empathy:* How do our empathic roots shape the understory of our practice? Deep connection can subtly challenge impartiality. Using research and peer insights, this session presents opportunities for discussion on how empathy manifests in our work, vulnerabilities that complicate our neutrality, and strategies to remain grounded while being present with visitors. Participants will develop a basic understanding of key research on empathy, including its various forms, and explore themes from anecdotal research conducted by the presenter. Participants will also engage in discussion to share perspectives on how empathy and impartiality work together in their Ombuds practice, and will learn 2–3 research-informed and experience-based strategies to maintain both empathy and impartiality in their work.

Session 5: Programming Committee, *Entangled in the Understory: Challenges to Ombuds Empathy and Impartiality (Case Studies):* following up on our learning from Session 4, the Programming Committee will lead small group discussions on a case study examining the impact of Ombuds empathy on our impartiality. Together we will explore cognitive, affective and

compassionate empathy; how our empathy impacts our impartiality, and strategies for managing it.

Session 6: Bryan Hanson, *Strengthening the Canopy: Reflective Practice and Resilience in Ombuds Work:* Ombuds absorb emotional strain while offering calm support to others. The stressors of our work are often invisible. This session explores reflective practice as a tool for resilience, meaning-making, and sustainability for Ombuds. Through intentional dialogue, participants will exchange strategies, deepen self-awareness, and establish habits for coping with stress.Participants will: (1) Identify common and often invisible sources of stress unique to ombuds work, including emotional residue, role ambiguity, confidentiality-related isolation, and systems frustration. (2) Exchange peer-informed strategies for coping, boundary setting, recovery, and sustaining compassion. (3) Explore reflective practice as a professional discipline that supports resilience, ethical clarity, emotional regulation, and continuous growth. (4) Learn and apply practical reflection tools that can be used after difficult cases, during periods of accumulated stress, or as part of regular professional maintenance. (5)Develop an action plan for integrating reflective habits into their ombuds practice.

Session 7: **Matt Ricke, *The Understory Speaks: Folklore, Myth and the Hidden Life of Organizational Conflict:*** This session explores organizational conflict as "Understory" -- hidden narratives shaping visible disputes. Drawing on folklore, liminality, and sensemaking theory, participants will learn practical tools for mythic mapping, archetypal analysis, and narrative reframing. Ombuds practitioners gain actionable strategies to surface meaning, navigate ambiguity, and foster conflict resilience within complex systems. By the end of this session, participants will be able to: Describe key concepts from folklore, liminality, and organizational sensemaking as they relate to conflict dynamics in organizational settings. Identify underlying "understory" elements in conflict situations, including hidden narratives, emotional drivers, and archetypal roles.Analyse conflict scenarios using a mythic mapping framework to surface competing narratives and points of rupture.Apply narrative reframing and archetypal inquiry techniques in ombuds practice to support sensemaking and engagement.Evaluate opportunities to integrate myth-informed approaches into their own ombuds practice to enhance conflict resilience.

Session 8: Kathie Greenwood, *Navigating Deep Rooted Organizational Conflicts: A "Tree-Layered" Case Study:* This case study, using a forest-health metaphor (canopy, understory, and roots), will explore a complex, decade-long conflict based on the contentious merger of two academic departments. Focusing on structural conditions, visible behaviors, and hidden dynamics, participants will engage in interactive and tactile skill-building activities relating to pattern recognition and interventions, highlighting the interconnectedness of conflict ecosystems.At the end of the session, participants will be able to analyze a complex organizational case, identify visible and hidden signs of conflict, recognize the interconnectedness and overlay of the issues across organizational levels, and propose stage-appropriate interventions that support organizational health.

Session 9: Cindy Mazur, *How Can Nature and Forest Therapy Enrich and Inform our Ombuds Practice:* The Association of Nature & Forest Therapy, establishes a framework to explore the intelligence and imagination of nature. This framework has facilitated decision making, better health, greater creativity, and even deep transformation. This session will

examine ways to incorporate the wisdom of the grove and understory into a mediation session. 1) Learn the Theory and Stages of Nature and Forest Therapy; 2) Learn to Apply the Theory and Stages to Mediation and Conflict Resolution; 3) Consider New Ideas to Push the Boundaries of Liminal Space contained within the Grove and the Understory.

Presenter Short Bios:

Jenn Mahony is the Boston Children's Hospital Ombuds Office Director. She obtained her J.D. from Emory University School of Law in 2001, worked as a dispute resolution professional and ombuds in New Zealand, and prior to being the inaugural Ombuds for Boston Children's, was an Associate Ombudsman at the National Institutes of Health. She is the current President of the Board of Directors of the International Ombuds Association. She is accredited in mediation and arbitration through the Arbitrators and Mediators Institute of New Zealand, where she is a Fellow in Arbitration and on the AMINZ mediation panel. She is a frequent presenter and educator on conflict resolution and building conflict resiliency at work.

Joan C. Waters is the University Ombuds Officer for Columbia University in New York. Serving the entire Columbia community of faculty, students and staff across all of Columbia's four campuses, Joan heads an office of three that is organized and operated pursuant to IOA standards. Joan is a former lawyer who prior to her ombuds role specialized in higher education and employment law. Joan is a trained mediator and is CO-OP certified. Within the ombuds community Joan is a member of the IOA, has served as an IOA mentor, on the CO-OP eligibility committee, has been long involved with The California Caucus of College and University Ombuds (CalCaucus) as a committee member, board member and officer and is a co-founder of the NY Area Ombuds group.

Kevin Coonrod is the University Ombuds at Auburn University. He is a frequent speaker on conflict resolution topics where he enjoys conveying his confidence in the ability of people to resolve their own conflicts through creativity and self-empowerment. Kevin is a member of the International Ombudsman Association and the California Caucus of College and University Ombuds. He is a Certified Organizational Ombudsman Practitioner and a member of the Alabama State Court Mediator Roster.

Jen Amano is currently the Associate University Ombuds at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte. She holds a Master of Education in College Student Affairs Administration from the University of West Florida and a Bachelor of Science in Management from George Mason University. Jen earned her Certified Organizational Ombuds credential through the International Ombuds Association in January 2026.

Dr. Matt Ricke (he/they) serves as a University Ombuds for Colorado State University. Prior to becoming a university ombuds, Matt worked in both university administration and teaching faculty. Matt holds a Ph.D. in Higher Education and Student Affairs Leadership from the University of Northern Colorado, M.S. from Minnesota State University, and B.A. from Western

Michigan University. Matt is a Board Certified Coach (BCC) as well as an IOA Certified Organizational Ombuds. Matt serves as co-chair of the Ombuds Committee of the American Bar Association (Dispute Resolution Section) and is a member of the International Ombuds Association, Mediators Beyond Borders International, and the American Academy of Experts on Traumatic Stress.

Kathie Greenwood, JD, PhD, is the University Ombuds supporting the UPC campus community. She is a Certified Organizational Practitioner (CO-OP®) and an active member of the International Ombuds Association, where she teaches the Foundations of Organizational Ombuds Course and serves as a mentor to ombuds new to the profession. Before joining USC, Kathie directed the Ombuds Office at UC Davis and UC Davis Health and served as Ombuds at the University of Colorado Denver. She began her career practicing international maritime law, working in New York, San Francisco, and London and teaching at Loyola University Chicago.

Cindy Mazur has managed the Ombuds Office for Los Alamos National Laboratory for five years. Before that, Cindy was the Director for the Alternative Dispute Resolution Division at the Federal Emergency Management Agency in Washington, DC for 20 years. She is a certified mediator and arbitrator and a Professionally Certified Coach. Cindy earned her PhD in conflict resolution from the Institute for Conflict Analysis and Resolution at George Mason University, her L.L.M. in Appellate Advocacy from Georgetown Law, her M. Div. from Princeton Theological Seminary, and her JD from Syracuse University. While in DC she mediated for the DC Courts and arbitrated for the DC Bar. She taught graduate classes in conflict resolution at George Mason University for seven years.