

The Office of Ombuds Services Report

This is the annual report from the Office of Ombuds Services at The Ohio State University and includes information on the activities of the Faculty and the Graduate and Professional Student Ombuds. The report begins with a description of the office, including the principles followed by the ombuds. The main content of the report are two sections summarizing the types of visitors and issues brought forward by them: the first section details the visitors, issues, and patterns from the graduate and professional student (GPS) ombuds, and the second describes the visitors, issues, and patterns from the faculty ombuds. While the services offered by the two ombuds are similar, the nature of the visitors and their concerns are different and for that reason, the report includes two distinct sections for each ombuds. The report concludes with a reflection on the status of ombuds services in general.

The Office of Ombuds Services is staffed by two ombuds, one for graduate and professional students and another for faculty. The Graduate and Professional Student (GPS) Ombuds was established in January 2021. This is the first annual report emanating from the GPS ombuds and covers the period from February 1, 2021, through August 15, 2022. The first and current GPS ombuds is Rebeka Campos-Astorkiza, Ph.D. (2021–present). The Faculty Ombuds was established on October 1, 2010. This is the twelfth annual report emanating from the faculty ombuds and covers the period from August 15, 2021, through August 15, 2022. The current faculty ombuds is Mollie Blackburn, Ph.D. (2021–present). Three other faculty have served in the position since its inception: Jack Rall, Ph.D. (2010–2013); Lynne Olson, Ph.D. (2013–2017), and Sally Rudman, Ph.D. (2017–2021).

The duties of the faculty ombudsperson are defined in faculty rule 3335-5-45.3. The duties of the graduate and professional student ombuds person, while not defined in any university rule, align with those of the faculty ombuds. Their duties include:

- (1) discussing issues and providing informal counsel and advice
- (2) helping visitors explore options and make decisions by gathering information and resources to aid in the process
- (3) directing visitors to appropriate offices, committees, university rules and policies
- (4) helping visitors assess the viability of complaints and issues
- (5) where appropriate serving as an informal mediator or facilitating communication among the parties involved.

The Office of Ombuds Services operates in close alignment to the principles of the International Ombudsperson Association (IOA). These principles are as follows:

- **Independence:** The Office of Ombuds Services functions independently of all university offices and operates outside of any formal organizational chart of the university. Neither the faculty ombuds nor the graduate and professional student ombuds represents the university administration nor any individual or group.
- **Neutrality/Impartiality:** Members of the Office of Ombuds Services do not take sides and remain neutral. They are not advocates for faculty or students or for the

university, rather the ombudsperson remains impartial in dealing with the concerns identified by visitors to the office. The ombuds do not have the power to change decisions but can advise, refer, review and/or persuade as neutral and impartial agents.

- **Confidentiality:** The ombudsperson respects the privacy of all who seek counsel and advice. Except in cases where there is imminent risk of bodily harm, all interactions are confidential to the extent allowed by law and policy. No records are kept except for personal notes which are maintained only to assure continuity, and which are destroyed at the completion of the case. Personal notes are not subject to Ohio open records law. The ombudsperson is required to report allegations of sexual harassment, discrimination, and intended violence to self and others.
- **Informality:** Meeting with an ombuds is an informal and off-the-record process, which includes such means as listening, providing and receiving information, identifying and reframing issues and developing a range of responsible options. The ombudsperson does not make binding decisions or participate in any university adjudicative or administrative hearing, process or procedure related to concerns brought to their attention. such as grievance procedures, research misconduct proceedings, proceedings under University Faculty Rule 3335-5-04, etc. Neither graduate and professional students nor faculty can be required to consult the ombudsperson.

The GPS and Faculty Ombuds belong to the International Ombudsperson Association (IOA) and the Ohio Ombudsperson Organization (OOO) and attend meetings and conferences on topics germane to ombuds practice in higher education. The ombuds also participated in training and professional development through IOA and other opportunities on campus. In addition, the ombuds engaged in outreach to the university community to promote their services and served on several university committees where their contributions come from insights gained from their interactions with graduate and professional students and faculty. This outreach and these service activities are ongoing.

The GPS ombuds serves on the Marketing and Communication Working Group from the Commission on Student Mental Health and Well-Being and on the Steering *ad hoc* Committee on Graduate Student Issues providing perspective gained from exchanges with graduate and professional students and institutional issues identified through ombuds' practice. In addition, the GPS ombuds participated as a panelist on several sessions on student success geared towards graduate students and faculty. Given that this position was recently established, the GPS ombuds engaged in outreach throughout campus to promote their services and connect with key people in the university community. This outreach effort included meetings with people on campus that work with graduate and professional students in different colleges and offices, and presentations in several venues such as the Council of Graduate Students, the Interprofessional Council, the Faculty Council, and the Association of Graduate and Professional Administrators.

The faculty ombuds served, and continues to serve, on the University Policies and Rules Committee, chaired by Kim Potter. For this committee, the faculty ombuds contributes ideas

based on the insights she has gleaned from talking with faculty about what makes a policy or rule difficult to interpret. The faculty ombuds also served on the Senate *ad hoc* committee on bullying and harassment, co-chaired by Amy Darragh and Russell Hassan. Here, the faculty ombuds shared faculty's experiences feeling bullied or harassed by others in the university. The faculty ombuds also, along with the GPS ombuds, presented at the new faculty orientation, the Drake Institute, and a College of Engineering faculty meeting.

GPS Ombuds Report

The GPS ombuds sought guidance and advice from several offices including: the Office of Legal Affairs, the Office of Academic Affairs, Human Resources, the Graduate School, the Office of Postdoctoral Affairs, the Employee Assistance Program, the Office of Research Compliance, the Office of Institutional Equity, the Drake Institute, and the Committee on Academic Misconduct. The ombuds would like to thank those individuals that provided counsel and helped make the ombuds' work possible and more efficient.

From February 2021 to August 2022, the GPS ombuds heard concerns from 134 visitors. 121 visitors were students of which 109 were graduate students (M.A. or Ph.D. students), 10 were professional students and 2 were dual-degree (professional and graduate) students. There were 7 other visitors that were not graduate or professional students but wanted to discuss issues that pertain to those students, including 3 faculty members, 1 assistant dean, 1 department chair, 1 grad applicant, and 1 alum on behalf of a grad student. There were 6 other visitors who did not discuss any issue that was related to graduate or professional students. This report includes only issues brought to the GPS ombuds' attention that pertain to graduate and professional students. Students were from 13 colleges (no visitors from Law, Optometry or Social Work) and 1 interdisciplinary program. In general, meetings were with individual visitors. In a few cases, the visit was initiated by one person who was requesting a meeting on behalf of two or more students. The great majority of meetings took place remotely, mostly via Zoom and in some cases on the phone. There were very few in-person meetings. In addition, some discussions took place exclusively via email. Around half of the meetings required follow-up, oftentimes via email. In a few cases, the complexity of the issue required considerable follow-up and meetings until the student felt like they had reached some form of conclusion. In some instances, multiple students came forth individually with a shared concern. Finally, the GPS ombuds attended 3 group meetings as observer (1) or mediator (2).

Categories of Issues

Most students reached out to the GPS ombuds with a concern or because they were facing some difficulty. Others were seeking information regarding certain procedures, and others wanted guidance with a certain process. The list below summarizes the main topics within these three areas:

- Concerns/issues:
 - o Issues/conflict with advisors/Pis/supervisors
 - o Toxic lab environment
 - o Fear of retribution from faculty

- Professional students' concerns over misconduct/professional code violation procedures
 - Professional students concerned about college's decisions
 - Dual degree students' issues with their program's administration
 - Misunderstandings regarding faculty availability during the summer
 - Issues with exams
 - Difficulty finding new advisors
 - Concerns stemming from GTA responsibilities
 - Lack of transparency in departmental/college graduate funding
 - OSU bureaucracy and difficulty to resolve administrative issues
 - Housing issues, including affordable housing and OSU graduate housing conditions
 - Concerns over OIE processes
 - Concerns over the outcomes of grievances processes against faculty
- Information sought regarding:
 - Leaves of absence
 - Grade grievances
 - Graduation deadlines and requirements
 - Filing a formal grievance with HR
 - Filing a report with OIE or the anonymous reporting line
 - How to leave a program
 - Sources of funding
 - Guidance and advice with:
 - Appeal processes in professional schools
 - Grievances against students
 - Finding a new advisor
 - Ethical dilemmas

Noticeable patterns

The most common concern brought by students was issues with their advisor or PI. Some cases were complex and usually involved situations where the student's relationship with their advisor or PI had deteriorated considerably. Students described challenges with their advisors stemming from toxic behavior by advisors, advisors not fulfilling their duties, advisors offering damaging feedback, lack of advisor support, or/and bad advising. Students also expressed concerns about bad lab environment, in many cases resulting from their relationship with the PI but sometimes aggravated by lab managers, postdocs and other graduate students. Conflict with PIs in the lab frequently resulted from a mismatch between PIs' and students' expectations in terms of amount of lab work/ presence and the students' perception that they weren't getting any training but rather just "working for the PI". In talking with the GPS ombuds about issues with their advisors or PI, students oftentimes expressed fear of retribution if they bring up any of their concerns or complaints to the faculty. They also mentioned that sometimes faculty seem to be unaware of

the power dynamics involved in student-advisor relationships and many students thought that their advisors/PIs are not aware of the impact of their actions on students. In most cases, students came to talk to the ombuds because they wanted to fix the relationship with their advisor or PI and were seeking coaching on how to do so, especially on how to improve communication.

Graduate students also discussed concerns related to their GTA responsibilities, most notably lack of structure for GTA duties, heavy workload (over 20 hours per week), and lack of channels for GTAs to give feedback. Another issue that was unique to graduate students was difficulty in finding a new advisor when advisors leave OSU or a student develops new research interests. In the former case, some students noted that their programs did not have any mechanism to support those students that suddenly were left without an advisor. Some graduate students had issues related to graduate exams, especially a perceived lack of guidance from their advisor and committee members that led to their failing the exam. In some cases, students thought that decisions regarding candidacy exams are opaque.

Professional students expressed concern over misconduct or professional code violation procedures, especially lack of clarity. Many of these students had received one such violation without any warning and felt threatened by the language used in the notification. In some cases, professional students sought guidance from the ombuds to put together their defense or appeal. In other cases, professional students raised concerns about college's decisions and a perceived lack of transparency usually stemming from the feeling that students do not have a venue to be consulted and share their opinions.

Several dual degree students (both students in two graduate programs and students in graduate+professional programs) brought concerns regarding the programs' integration and structure. Their main issue was feeling like they "fall through the cracks" and neither program fully supports them when issues or glitches arise. These students expressed having a positive academic experience but were concerned about the administration of the dual degrees. Some dual degree students in graduate/professional programs described unequal treatment compared to professional students in the same program, a concern also shared by some graduate students in professional colleges.

The impact of COVID on graduate and professional students was apparent in some of the visitors. There were questions about further funding options from students who had run out of funding, and some of those students said that their progress had been impacted by COVID. Some graduate students enquired about the process of taking a leave of absence motivated by the impact of COVID, either because they suffered from long-term COVID or because of the negative impact on the pandemic on their personal and academic life. There were cases where students' mental health had been impacted by the pandemic and its ramifications.

Some students expressed frustration with OSU's bureaucracy and described difficulty in resolving administrative issues, including problems with Workday and Buckeyelink. These students highlighted how hard it can be to get answers and solve issues related to administrative matters. Several students expressed concern over processes with the Office of Institutional Equity. These were students that had submitted a report with OIE as complainants for which there was an

ongoing process/investigation. There were also questions regarding the outcome of grievance procedures against faculty and a perceived lack of faculty accountability by the students.

The Faculty Ombuds Report

In 2021–22, the faculty ombudsperson heard concerns/issues from 93 visitors. 62 of these were tenure track faculty, including one who was visiting, one who had recently left the university, and one who was emeritus. Of the 62 tenure-track faculty who contacted the office, 24 were professors, 17 were associate professors, and 21 were assistant professors; of these 62, eight had additional titles such as chair, associate or vice chair, endowed chair, director, and coordinator. Two were associated faculty, and four were lecturers. Ten were clinical faculty, including four at the assistant level, three at the associate level, and three at full. Two were professors of practice. There were thirteen other visitors.

The visitors in the 21–22 school year included those from four of our campuses. They represented 14 colleges and schools and several other units. Most typically, meetings were with individual visitors. In a few cases, the visit was initiated by one person who was requesting a meeting on behalf of two or more others. Some meetings were in person and some were virtual, fewer were solely by phone or email.

To serve these 93 visitors, the faculty ombuds participated in over 163 substantive interactions (face-to-face meetings, virtual meetings, e-mail exchanges, and phone calls). Some faculty came forth with multiple concerns. In some instances, multiple faculty from a single department came forth with a shared concern. Preparing for many of these interactions demanded considerable research. The faculty ombuds consulted with the Office of Academic Affairs, Employee Labor Relations, the Office of Institutional Equity, the Office of Legal Affairs, the Office of Compliance and Integrity, the Office of Research Compliance, the Drake Institute, Student Life Disability Services, and the Committee on Academic Freedom and Responsibility. The ombuds offers her gratitude to the people who provided counsel and helped make her work possible and more efficient.

The number of visitors in the 21–22 school year marks a substantial increase (over double) of each of the previous two years: in the 20–21 school year, Dr. Rudmann spoke with 40 visitors and in the 19–20 school year, she spoke with 38. That said, Dr. Rudmann noted, in her reports, that there were fewer visitors than usual in those years because of the pandemic. Prior to the pandemic, in both the 18–19 and 17–18 school years, there were 50 visitors per year. Since 2010, when the university first designated an ombuds, the numbers of visitors ranged from 31 (in the 15–16 school year) to 61 (in the 13–14 school year). Thus, this year has shown an increase of about 50% from the highest previous year and about 200% from the lowest previous year.

Categories of Issues

The most prominent category of inquiries were complaints about the perception of higher ranked people mistreating lower ranked people in the university, such as supervisors mistreating faculty and students, professors mistreating associate and assistant professors, and supervisors treating variously ranked faculty discrepantly. But there were also complaints about faculty mistreating faculty colleagues, and even faculty mistreating supervisors and students mistreating faculty. In other words, the mistreatment described typically was imposed on those with less power by those with more, but not always. It is also worth noting that sometimes there were discussions exploring what the root causes of such mistreatment might be.

Faculty also expressed concerns about the decisions made by leaders in their units. People were disgruntled about what they perceived as demotions, including loss of salary, title, space, or leadership opportunities. Some people worried about leaders' roles in promotion and tenure processes, among other concerns about promotion and tenure processes. Others disagreed with teaching expectations, whether it was about location, such as on or off campus, or load, like numbers of students and numbers of courses. There were also a cluster of concerns about perceived unkept promises by leaders, whether those promises were made as a part of recruitment efforts or in relation to renegotiation of current employees. On a related note, there were broader concerns about hostile climates in particular units at section, departmental, college, and university levels.

There was another substantial category of inquiries about faculty rules. Some were focused on pay discrepancies and annual merit compensation. Some were focused on leaves, including family and medical leave, parental leave, Special Assignments, and Faculty Professional leave. Some were focused on potential relationships with the university after retirement. Some were focused on protections for those with disabilities. Moreover, there were questions about the reporting of discrimination, including the parameters for when this is required and how anonymity is protected, as well discussions of unintended consequences of the rule.

Some visitors discussed how to respond to and recover from having had complaints made against them.

There were also a handful of concerns about university policies and practices regarding COVID, some feeling like they were too relaxed and others feeling like they were too stringent.

Noticeable Patterns

It seems to be very difficult for people—leaders and faculty alike—when a unit is being challenged to change in some dramatic way. Sometimes this is a restructuring. Sometimes it is shifting from a practitioner-oriented approach to a more scholarly-oriented approach. There are other changes as well that add a great deal of stress to those involved. It raises the question of whether units undergoing such significant transitions need more guidance and support.

It is in no way surprising that the weight of recent social, political, and cultural turmoil, including but not limited to the pandemic have had material and even devastating consequences for all of us affiliated with the university, and beyond. That these consequences have resulted in increased faculty discontent is not surprising, but it is still an issue we must attend to. We must find ways to improve the climate of our campus and the morale of community members.

Conclusions and Recommendations

There are some concerns expressed by visitors to both ombuds. These include concerns about college decisions, conflicts with supervisors, fear of retribution, and complaint of toxic work environments. Both GPS and faculty visitors conveyed concerns over OIE processes, processes for appeals and grievances, and leave policies. Moreover, visitors to both ombuds came to talk through ethical dilemmas.

OSU's Office of the Ombuds has strengthened over time. Just adding a GPS Ombuds has allowed the office to serve so many more people at the university, and the number of faculty served has also increased. There are still needs, however. It seems that the FTE for the role of faculty ombuds might need to be increased. Further, both ombuds have talked with staff about their need for an ombuds. This is not unique to OSU. Indeed, ombuds practice continues to grow in academic settings across the nation. Of the fourteen Big Ten Schools, five of them serve any member of their university communities and are staffed accordingly, although variably, depending on the size of the schools. The Office of the Ombuds wonders whether this is a direction the university is considering.