

## 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 Graduate and Professional Student Ombuds and the Faculty 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. 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 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.

The Office of Ombuds Services is staffed by two ombuds, one for graduate and professional students and another for faculty; both ombuds serve postdocs. The Graduate and Professional Student (GPS) Ombuds was established in January 2021. This is the second annual report emanating from the GPS ombuds and covers the period from August 15, 2022 through August 15, 2023. 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 thirteenth annual report emanating from the faculty ombuds and covers the period from August 15, 2022, through August 15, 2023. 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.
- **Impartiality:** Members of the Office of Ombuds Services do not take sides and remain impartial. 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 impartial agents.

- **Confidentiality:** The ombudsperson respects the privacy of all who seek counsel and advice. Except in cases that require mandated reporting, like sexual harassment, discrimination, and intended violence to self or others, 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.
- **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, like the first meeting of the Big 10 Ombuds. The ombuds also 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. The training, outreach, and service activities are ongoing.

The GPS ombuds served on the Marketing and Communication Working Group from the Commission on Student Mental Health and Well-Being (until December 2022) and the Student Wellness Center search committee for a graduate student specialist (summer 2023). She currently serves on the Steering *ad-hoc* Committee on Graduate Student Issues and the AOD Policy Committee, 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. The GPS ombuds also 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, among others.

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, along with the GPS ombuds, presented at the 2022 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 Graduate School, the Office of Academic Affairs, Human Resources, the Office of International Affairs, the Student Advocacy Center, the Office of Research Compliance, the Office of Institutional Equity, University Housing, Registration Services, 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 August 15, 2022 to August 15, 2023, the GPS ombuds heard concerns from 96 visitors. 83 visitors were students of which 77 were graduate students (M.A. or Ph.D. students), 5 were professional students, and 2 were dual-degree (professional and graduate) students. There were 5 other visitors who were not graduate or professional students but wanted to discuss issues that pertain to those students, including 1 graduate advisor, 1 department chair, 1 director of graduate students, 1 DEI committee chair, and 1 parent. There were two graduate students who were also staff at OSU and wanted to discuss issues related to their jobs. In addition, there were 2 residents and 2 postdocs. Finally, there was 1 visitor who did not discuss any issue that was related to graduate or professional students or postdocs and residents. This report includes only issues brought to the GPS ombuds' attention that pertain to graduate and professional students.

Students were from 14 colleges (no visitors from Law or Optometry) and 3 interdisciplinary programs. 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 individuals. 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 several cases, the complexity of the issue required considerable follow-up and meetings until the student felt like they had reached some form of conclusion. Finally, the GPS ombuds attended 3 group meetings as observer.

### *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 with advisors and PIs
  - o Fear of retribution if they, as students, speak up
  - o Issues with graduate exams
  - o Vulnerability of international students
  - o Not enough adequate support for students from diverse backgrounds
  - o Concerns during HR complaints and OIE reports investigations

- Issues with the organization and instruction of graduate classes
  - Lack of transparency in departmental graduate funding
  - Misunderstandings regarding faculty's duties and availability during the summer
  - Issues with University Housing
  - Issues with Ohio residency for tuition purposes
- Information regarding:
    - Leaves of absence
    - Grade grievances
    - Filing a formal grievance with HR or a report with OIE
    - How to resign from a program – implications of GRA/GTA resignations
    - Sources of funding
    - Payroll
  - Guidance and advice with:
    - Changing advisors
    - Appeal processes in professional schools
    - Grievances against them
    - COAM violations
    - Research collaborations

### *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, including aggressiveness and advisors not listening; advisors not fulfilling their duties, especially lack of timely feedback and not enough guidance for exams; advisors being too critical and giving non-constructive feedback; lack of advisor's support; and cultural differences. Conflict with advisors/Pis in the lab frequently resulted from a perception of having a heavy workload and of being held back in terms of the student's own research. In general, students felt advisors were not treating them with respect and consideration. In addition, several students talked about their advisors' lack of understanding of mental health issues and the accommodations needed. In talking with the GPS ombuds about issues with their advisors or PIs, students oftentimes expressed fear of retribution if they brought up any of their concerns to the faculty, especially not being allowed to graduate. In some cases, students came to talk to the ombuds because they wanted advice and coaching on how to navigate the situation, make things better or dissipate the tension with their advisors/Pis. In other cases, students were considering placing a formal complaint and were seeking guidance on the process; some of these students waited until after graduation to look into this option.

Several students sought counsel on whether to change advisors and how to go about it. In some cases, students were considering this option because of conflict with their current advisors and in others, students had realized that their interests or approach to research were different from their advisors. In all cases, students were worried about any possible repercussions from switching advisors.

Some graduate and professional students also discussed what they considered to be unique experiences that stem from their background. Several students described the vulnerability of international students and the feeling that they have fewer options than domestic students, which contributes to their situation being more precarious and not speaking up. Students from diverse backgrounds, including 1<sup>st</sup> generation and students of color, felt that while their units wanted to increase diversity among students, there is not enough support or the right resources for them.

Other graduate students had issues related to graduate exams, especially a perceived lack of transparency in how decisions are reached, most notably in cases where a committee does not allow a student to take a second MA exam. Some of these students were considering, and wanted guidance with, pursuing an exam grievance process with the Graduate School.

Some students' issues were related to funding, including how to find available funding on campus; lack of departmental transparency in relation to graduate funding; options when an advisor lacks funding for the student; and summer funding. Several students also wanted to discuss how to find support outside the university, i.e., jobs (especially for the summer) or grants/fellowships. Students expressed their concern over the OSU stipend amount and inflation, including the lack of a university-wide stipend increase for AY 2022-2023.

Several students sought advice to navigate a situation while there is an ongoing OIE or HR process or investigation initiated by them. Many of these students worried about retaliation and felt like there is no protection for them while a case with OIE or HR is ongoing. In some cases, students were critical of the outcome of such investigations/processes.

Some students expressed frustration in relation to the policy and the process of applying for Ohio residency for tuition purposes, namely that the application of the policy does not consider the complex situation of graduate students. Other students had issues with University Housing in relation to the timing of when they are required to leave their apartments and graduation or the end of GRA appointments, especially in the summer. Students felt that the guidelines for this situation are unclear and seem to not take graduate students' timelines into account.

Students in general, but especially professional students, sought advice and guidance when they had an academic misconduct or professional code violation. The GPS ombuds not only clarified the process to these students but also assisted in putting together their appeals.

## **The Faculty Ombuds Report**

In 2022-23, the faculty ombudsperson heard concerns and issues from 104 visitors, up from 93 last year. 81 were faculty, and 58 of these 81 were tenure track faculty. Among the tenure track faculty, 5 were ranked assistant professors, 26 associate, and 27 full. Of the remaining 23 faculty, 11 were clinical/teaching/practice faculty, 1 was research faculty, and 11 were associated faculty, including lecturers, visiting faculty, affiliated faculty, and extension faculty. 14 of the 81 faculty also held administrative positions. In addition to faculty, 10 visitors were staff and 6 were students; there were 7 other visitors. The visitors in the 22-23 school year included those from five campuses and extension locations. They represented 13 colleges and 3 other units.

This year, for the first time, the faculty ombuds distributed invitations to complete a Qualtrics survey after most, but not all, initial visits. This began in mid-October. Visitors who came before then did not receive the invitation. Visitors who were not faculty and visitors who never provided an email address were also excluded. 60 invitations were sent, and approximately 55 were completed. (“Approximately” because the Qualtrics report goes through the end of August, even though this report only covers until August 15<sup>th</sup>.) The results indicate that respondents heard about the ombuds office from friends, colleagues, mentors, and administrators, mostly. They also heard about the office through the New Faculty Orientation, the Drake Institute, the Office of Faculty Affairs, and Human Resources. Finally, the OSU website, OSU communications, and google searches also brought people to the ombuds. Among respondents, approximately 11 identified as international, 5 as having a disability, and 3 as being a member of an LGBTQ+ community. There were slightly more women than men who visited the faculty ombuds, and only 1 person who identified as non-binary. Data related to race and ethnicity was quite varied, with many visitors selecting many races and ethnicities, but roughly speaking 37 respondents identified as white, 4 as Asian, 4 as Latinx, 3 and Black, 3 and Middle Eastern, and 1 as multiracial. 4 others declined to reply.

To serve the 104 visitors, the faculty ombuds participated in over 154 substantive interactions (face-to-face meetings, virtual meetings, e-mail exchanges, and phone calls). Most typically, meetings were with individual visitors. Some visitors came forth with multiple concerns. 32 visitors came multiple times, ranging from just 2 visits to as many as 16. In some instances, multiple visitors from a single unit came forth with a shared concern. In the case of 15 visitors, the ombuds met with them among a group of people. Sometimes the people in the group were also visitors; sometimes they were not, depending on whether they were seeking support from the ombuds or merely in a discussion with someone else seeking support.

The actions taken by the ombuds were organized into 9 different categories. In many interactions, more than 1 action was taken. Overall, the ombuds

- Developed and considered options with 61 visitors,
- Identified and clarified issues with 52 visitors,
- Referred resources to 49 visitors,
- Provided information to 42 visitors,

- Looked into issues for 31 visitors,
- Coached ways of navigating conflicts with 22 visitors,
- Provided upward feedback on behalf of 10 visitors,
- Observed discussions for 4 visitors, and
- Facilitated or mediated 2 group discussions.

Preparing for some 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 Research Compliance, and The College of Medicine. The ombuds offers her gratitude to the people who provided counsel and helped make her work possible and more efficient.

### *Categories of Issues*

I've organized these issues from the most to least frequently discussed with the faculty ombuds.

By far, most concerns fell into two categories: frustration with leadership and, relatedly, shifting expectations and compensation for labor. With respect to frustration with leadership, visitors pointed to a lack of transparency in processes with financial implications. They also discussed unit leaders hindering scholarship, prohibiting access to earned funds, and failing to support faculty in leadership opportunities. Some of these concerns related to promotion and tenure processes and even hiring and firing processes. Some visitors talked about more immediate supervisors being hypercritical and micromanaging.

A related prominent issue is the shifting expectations and compensations for work. Visitors talked about being assigned additional responsibilities, beyond the scope of what they understood as their positions, without additional compensation, as well as having some responsibilities removed alongside a drop in compensation. Faculty also talked about promises made not being kept. These were related to labor, compensation, and space.

Some visitors were frustrated with their experiences with the Office of Institutional Equity. Most typically, people had filed a complaint, the issue was resolved, and the relationships among those involved were damaged. Others feared this happening. Some faculty felt like students filed complaints as a protected way of retaliating against faculty.

Some visitors were frustrated with their colleagues behaving in ways they experienced as aggressive or hostile, sometimes toward them, other times toward staff and students, all of which impacted visitors.

Some visitors were seeking help in finding information and resources, like how to contact someone, where to submit information, where to file a complaint, how to protect their privacy, and how to find certain policies, procedures, and rules.

Some visitors came to consult about the possibilities of having an ombuds for a specific unit, rather than university-wide, or for an additional constituent, like staff.

Some visitors came seeking guidance on working with particularly challenging students.

Some visitors were dissatisfied with university services, like parking and custodial services.

### *Noticeable Pattern*

Undergirding many of this year's visits was the feeling of fear. Visitors feared losing their jobs. They feared not being able to do their jobs. They feared retaliation for doing their jobs. They also feared legal changes that have provoked changes in university policies and rules.

### **Conclusions**

There are some concerns expressed by visitors to both ombuds. These include concerns about 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.