

## 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 report concludes by identifying concerns across constituent groups.

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 third annual report emanating from the GPS ombuds and covers the period from August 15, 2023 through August 14 2024. 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 fourteenth annual report emanating from the faculty ombuds and covers the period from August 15, 2023, through August 14 2024. 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). It is worth noting that there were prior ombuds who served the university community more broadly from around 1971 to 1996. Blackburn and Campos-Astorkiza started researching this history during the 2023–2024 academic year and are continuing to work on this project.

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 attend meetings, like monthly meetings of the Ohio Ombudsperson Organization (OOO), and conferences, like meetings of the Big 10 Ombuds, on topics germane to ombuds practice in higher education. They also received further training through the Essential Partners Program. The ombuds also engaged in outreach to the university community, like at the New Faculty Orientation and the Campus Resource Fair, to promote their services, and they served on several university committees where their contributions come from insights gained from their interactions with graduate and professional students and faculty. Further, the ombuds have worked together to write a manual for future ombuds and to research and draft a history of the role of ombuds at the university.

The GPS ombuds currently serves on the OSU Mentorship Working Group, spear-headed by the Graduate School, providing perspective gained from exchanges with graduate and professional students and institutional issues identified through ombuds' practice. During AY 2023–2024, the GPS ombuds also served on the Steering *ad-hoc* Committee on Graduate Student Issues and the Student Wellness Center search committee for a graduate and professional student specialist. 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 Faculty Council, University Housing, and the Association of Graduate and Professional Administrators, among others. The GPS ombuds provided input for the Shared Values Summit.

The faculty ombuds served, and continues to serve, on the University Policy Review Committee, chaired by Kim Potter. For this committee, the faculty ombuds contributes ideas based on the insights gleaned from talking with faculty about what makes a policy or rule difficult to interpret. The faculty ombuds also worked, and continues to work, with Bill Froehlich, of the Moritz College of Law, and with his Divided Community Project, including the Campus Bridge Program. She also attended the university's Shared Values Summit.

### **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, and the Moritz College of Law Library. The ombuds would like to thank those individuals that provided counsel and helped make the ombuds' work possible and more efficient.

From August 15, 2023 to August 14 2024, the GPS ombuds heard concerns from 103 visitors. 89 visitors were students of which 86 were graduate students (M.A. or Ph.D. students), 2 were professional students, and 1 was a dual-degree (professional and graduate) student. There were 6 other visitors who were not graduate or professional students but wanted to discuss issues that pertain to those students, including 2 faculty members, 1 parent, 1 staff member, 1 student advocate (from Student Advocacy), and 1 spouse. In addition, there were 2 postdocs and 2 relatives of a resident. Finally, there were 4 visitors that wanted to discuss undergraduate matters, including 3 undergraduate students and 1 parent. 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 Dentistry or Optometry) and 4 graduate students from interdisciplinary graduate 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 or more individuals. The great majority of meetings took place remotely, mostly via Zoom and in some cases on the phone. In addition, some discussions took place exclusively via email. Around half of the meetings required follow-ups, oftentimes via email. In several cases (18), 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 and 1 group meeting as facilitator.

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

- Developed and considered options with 94 visitors,
- Referred resources to 64 visitors,
- Identified and clarified issues with 68 visitors,
- Provided information to 55 visitors,

- Coached ways of navigating conflicts with 36 visitors,
- Looked into issues for 7 visitors,
- Provided a referral to a university resource for 19 visitors
- Provided upward feedback stemming from interactions with 4 visitors.

### *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 certain processes. The list below summarizes the main topics within these three areas:

- Concerns/issues:
  - Issues with advisors and PIs
  - Fear of retribution if they, as students, speak up
  - Vulnerability of international students
  - Issues with graduate exams
  - Issues with graduate classes and instructors
  - Issues with other graduate students
  - Issues with department chairs
  - Lack of transparency in departmental graduate funding
  - Issues with Ohio residency for tuition purposes
  - Issues with COAM process
- Information regarding:
  - Grade grievances
  - Filing a formal complaint
  - Sources of funding
  - Payroll
  - Working remotely
  - Co-authorship
  - Leaving a position half-way through the semester
- Guidance and advice with:
  - Changing advisors
  - Appeal processes in professional schools
  - Grievance process with the Graduate School
  - 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 (e.g. yelling and swearing) and advisors not listening; advisors not fulfilling their duties, especially lack of timely feedback, not enough guidance for exams, and not replying to emails; advisors being too critical and giving non-constructive feedback; advisor discussing students' performance in front of other people; 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 not being treated as trainees but rather as "cheap labor." In other cases, students were expecting flexibility in their positions but that was not the case. Other students were concerned about the lack of balance between their GRA position responsibilities and their coursework. 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 and powerlessness—they talked about lack of accountability for faculty. 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 most cases, students were considering this option because of conflict with their current advisors. Some other students were seeking new advisors because their previous one had left OSU—these students highlighted their difficult position. In all cases, students were worried about any possible repercussions from switching advisors.

Several students had issues and/or questions regarding co-authorship, including how to determine who is included as a co-author and how the order of authors is determined. In most cases, there had been no explicit discussion of this matter with their advisors/Pis, and students did not agree with the final decision regarding co-authorship.

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 and no protection, which contributes to their situation being more precarious and not speaking up. Students with neurodiversity were concerned about lack of understanding and needed accommodations.

Other graduate students had issues related to graduate exams and wanted to pursue a grievance process with the Graduate School. These students highlighted a perceived lack of transparency in how decisions are reached regarding the outcome of graduate examinations. Other students used the Graduate School grievance process to contest termination from a program.

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 reported that their funding had been cut short without any warning, while other students seemed to have received funds. Some students were not aware of the funding package they have been offered when accepted into their programs which contributed to the confusion.

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 difficulty solving clerical errors and reported difficulty reaching several OSU offices including the Registrar and HR.

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 2023–24, the faculty ombudsperson heard concerns and issues from 122 visitors, up from 104 last year and 93 the year before that. The visitors in the 23–24 school year included those from five campuses and extension locations. They represented 13 of 16 colleges and 3 other units.

79 visitors were faculty, and 61 of these 79 were tenure track faculty. Among the tenure track faculty, 9 were ranked assistant professors, 33 associate professors, and 19 professors. Of the remaining 18 faculty, 9 were clinical/teaching/practice faculty and 9 were associated faculty, including fellows, lecturers, instructors, and visiting faculty. 13 of the 81 faculty also held administrative positions.

43 of the visitors were not faculty. 3 of these were administrators (solely, not in addition to being faculty), 3 were program managers, 2 were research assistants, and 2 worked in HR. 5 visitors were postdocs; 4 were graduate and professional students; and 5 were UG students. 3 were parents of students. The ombuds redirected UG students and sometimes their parents to the Student Advocacy Center. 16 visitors were from outside of the university. These visitors seem to have conflated the OSU ombuds and ombuds of the state of Ohio. The ombuds directed these visitors to more appropriate service providers, when able, but has not yet been able to identify the source of the problem.

Last year, the faculty ombuds<sup>1</sup> began collecting demographic data by distributing invitations to complete a Qualtrics survey to some visits. The purpose of the survey was to ascertain the diversity of faculty being served by the ombuds. She did not invite visitors who were not faculty, since the survey was designed for faculty. Moreover, she only invited faculty visitors who contacted her via email, since some visitors who contacted her in other ways did so for privacy purposes and she did not want to violate their wishes. Finally, she did not send invitations to visitors who had previously been invited because she did not want repeat responses. 49 invitations were sent, and 35 people responded. The results indicated that respondents heard about the ombuds office primarily through colleagues and secondarily through the website and university communications, like newsletters and email blasts. Several “just knew” about the office, and others learned about it from supervisors or mentors, faculty orientation, University Senate, OIE, and University Faculty Rules. Among the 35 respondents, 8 identified as a member of an LGBTQ+ community, 6 as international, and 2 as having a disability. 22 visitors identified as female and 2 others as women. 8 identified as male, 1 as genderqueer, and 2 declined to identify in terms of sex or gender. With respect to race and ethnicity, 24 identified as white, Caucasian, or European American; 6 as Asian, Asian Indian, or Asian American; 3 as Latinx, Hispanic, or Chicano; 3 as African American, Black, or African; and 1 as American Indian, Native American, or Alaska Native; 1 as Native Hawaiian, Pacific Islander, or Oceanic American; 1 as multiracial, and 1 as other. Some respondents selected multiple categories of race and ethnicity; none declined to answer.

To serve the 122 visitors, the faculty ombuds participated in over 221 substantive interactions (face-to-face meetings, virtual meetings, email exchanges, and phone calls). Most typically, meetings were with individual visitors. 28 visitors came multiple times within the year, ranging from just 2 visits to as many as 25. In some instances, multiple visitors from a single unit came forth with a shared concern. In the case of 9 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 70 visitors,
- Referred resources to 64 visitors,
- Identified and clarified issues with 49 visitors,
- Provided information to 37 visitors,
- Coached ways of navigating conflicts with 33 visitors,
- Looked into issues for 15 visitors,

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<sup>1</sup> It is worth noting that the GPS ombuds did not collect the same survey data. She created a parallel survey, but sharing it with students did not seem appropriate given that most visitors were emotionally strained, which, added to the power discrepancy between the GPS ombuds and students, made the potential risks of asking students to complete it outweigh any potential benefit.

- Observed discussions for 9 visitors, and
- Provided upward feedback on behalf of 1 visitor.

Preparing for some of these interactions and actions 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.

Most issues were focused on difficult interactions or relationships with supervisors. Visitors were particularly concerned about leaders failing to follow rules, including those defined by the Americans with Disabilities Act, Human Resources, and Promotion and Tenure Processes as well as those around curricular purview. Visitors also reported leaders constraining their scholarly lives and suppressing their rights to free speech. Some felt unsupported, whereas others felt harassed. Sometimes supervisors felt harassed by faculty, as well.

But the tensions identified were not limited to supervisors and service providers. Visitors reported being maligned by and even maligning colleagues. They reported being demeaned by students. They also wanted to discuss ways of managing tensions among students.

Another prominent concern was related to shifting job expectations. For some, what they were promised in recruitment or retention efforts did not come to fruition. Others were expected to increase their load without increased compensation. There were also tensions around expectations of working in person versus working remotely, the details of joint appointments, and the interpretation of service obligations. Faculty sought guidance on striving for work-life balance.

There were also concerns around complaints and investigations, specifically the consequences of working while being investigated and after the completion of an investigation. Visitors sought support in responding to negative decisions, including but not limited to promotion and tenure decisions.

Visitors also conveyed concern about their scholarship being hindered by slow HR and fiscal processes. They worried about equity and errors in pay. They asked for clarity in various university processes such as salary negotiation, public record requests, and retirement.

The most noticeable patterns were related to tensions with supervisors and shifting expectations of labor. Last year, this report stated, “By far, most concerns fell into two categories: frustration with leadership and, relatedly, shifting expectations and compensation for labor.” These two concerns continued into the 23–24 academic year.

## **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 shifting expectations regarding presence in the workplace and workload. Moreover, visitors to both ombuds came to talk through ethical dilemmas.