

# UMassAmherst

## University Ombuds Office



### FY21 Annual Report

July 1, 2020 through June 30, 2021

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*\*To underscore our neutrality, ombuds use the term “visitor” for those who access our services.*

## INTRODUCTION

The year 2020 marked fifty years since the University of Massachusetts Ombuds Office first opened its doors. Our world has undergone enormous change in the intervening decades and the Ombuds Office has evolved as well, adapting and utilizing best practices to meet the changing needs of the campus.

Contemporary ombuds practice is based on four core ethical principles: confidentiality, neutrality, informality, and independence. These four principles work together to create a unique University-wide resource supporting fairness, integrity, and a positive climate. The Ombuds Office provides a space where all members of the campus community can talk through issues informally, learn about related policies and resources, consider a range of options, and receive conflict coaching, informal mediation, or other resolution services.

The availability of these alternative dispute resolution services provides the campus and our visitors with an opportunity to resolve issues through collaboration and negotiation, potentially avoiding more high-stakes and time-consuming formal grievance procedures. In service to the University as a whole, we are able to aggregate concerns and offer campus leaders early notice of institutional issues and support for institutional quality and integrity.

Research has shown that ombuds offices play an important role in supporting the retention of women and minorities. The Center for Employment Equity at UMass recently shared a report entitled “[What Works: Evidence-Based Ideas to Increase Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion in the Workplace](#),” which included a chapter authored by faculty at Harvard University and Tel Aviv University endorsing ombuds offices. What UMass had the foresight to establish more than a half century ago has come to be recognized as an evidence-based best practice for organizations worldwide.

### **Mission and Charter**

The Ombuds Office Charter (2016) describes the mission of the Office:

“The Ombuds Office supports the University’s mission and values of engagement, equity, inclusiveness, and integrity by providing confidential assistance for faculty, staff, and students to raise and resolve their University-related concerns and conflicts. The Office fosters a campus culture in which differences can be resolved early and informally through respectful communication and fair process.”

Our mission underscores that consulting with the Ombuds Office is a positive step toward constructively resolving university-related issues. The Charter further emphasizes that the use of Ombuds Office services is voluntary and that our visitors are protected from retaliation. See: <https://www.umass.edu/ombuds/our-mission-and-charter>

## **OPERATIONS**

### **Staffing**

In FY21 the Ombuds Office staff included:

- Susan Pearson, Interim University Ombudsperson (part-time)
- Martha Patrick, Associate Ombudsperson (full-time)
- Erica Avery, Office Manager (part-time)

In the past, the office has operated with two to three full-time ombuds and a full- or part-time office manager. Recently, campus leadership made the decision to reallocate resources, and reduce the Ombuds Office staffing level to one full-time ombudsperson and a part-time office manager. This realignment will allow the University to embed dedicated dispute resolution practitioners within Academic Affairs and Student Affairs. While these positions will not operate with the same protections and standards as the ombuds, they are expected to add to the campus' ability to address conflict through a diversified dispute resolution system.

### **Appointments**

During FY21 the office operated entirely remotely providing services to visitors by email, phone, and video conference. The shift to conducting mediations and facilitated conversations remotely required some adjustments, both in how parties were prepared for their participation and how the conferences were managed. Those who contacted the office received a response within one business day. Visitors expressed appreciation for the increased convenience and privacy of video conferences, and the Ombuds Office experienced a significant reduction in the number of missed appointments.

### **Data Collection**

During FY20 the Ombuds Office recorded 377 visitors in total. Due to changes in staffing and the move to remote operations, detailed data for FY20 was incomplete. For this reason the Office did not produce an annual report for FY20. For FY21 the Ombuds Office expanded data collection in several categories to include the following:

- more detailed information about our visitors' campus roles and social identities,

- the mode of initial meeting and number of contacts,
- the context of the concern (administrative, academic, workplace, etc.),
- more detailed information about the entity of concern, and
- concerns directly related to COVID.

We also refined the categories of concerns to remove redundancies, better align with the values and goals outlined in the Campus Strategic Plan, and allow the Ombuds Office to provide more meaningful and timely feedback to campus leaders.

## DATA

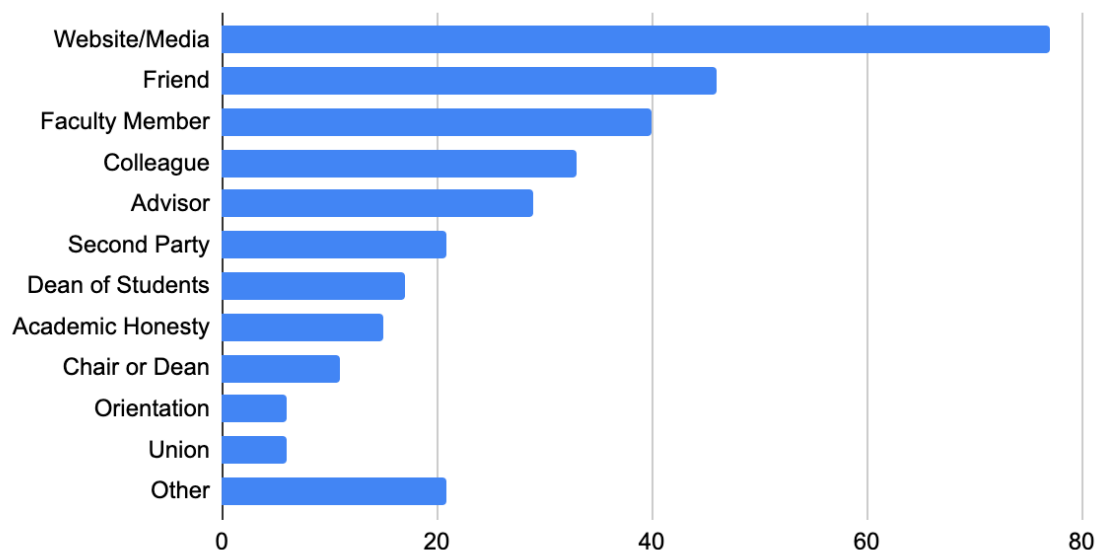
### Intake Data

The Ombuds Office provided services to 430 visitors during FY21. The introduction of video conferencing as a meeting option was well-received with more than half of our visitors electing to meet by Zoom. First-time visitors accounted for 76% of the total with referrals coming from a range of sources.

#### First Visit



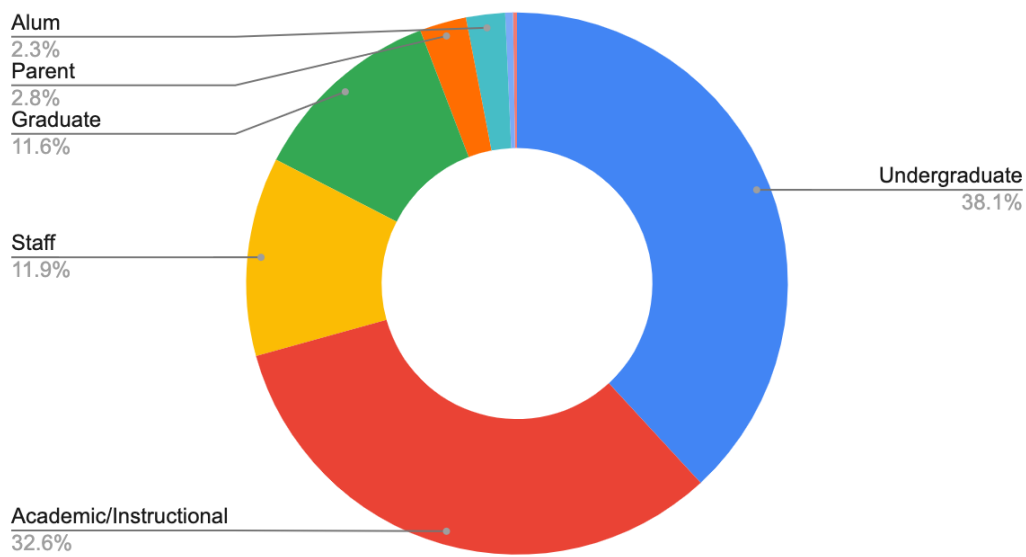
#### Referral Source



## Visitor Roles

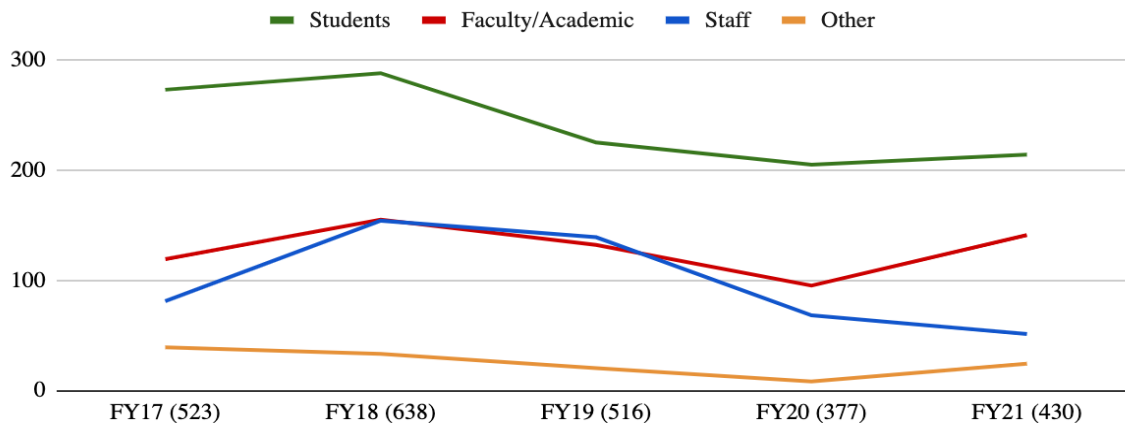
Ombuds Office services are available to all students, faculty, and staff at the University. Undergraduate and graduate students combined comprised half of our visitors followed by faculty and other instructors (32.6%), staff (11.9%), parents (2.8%), and alumni (2.3%).

Visitors: University Role



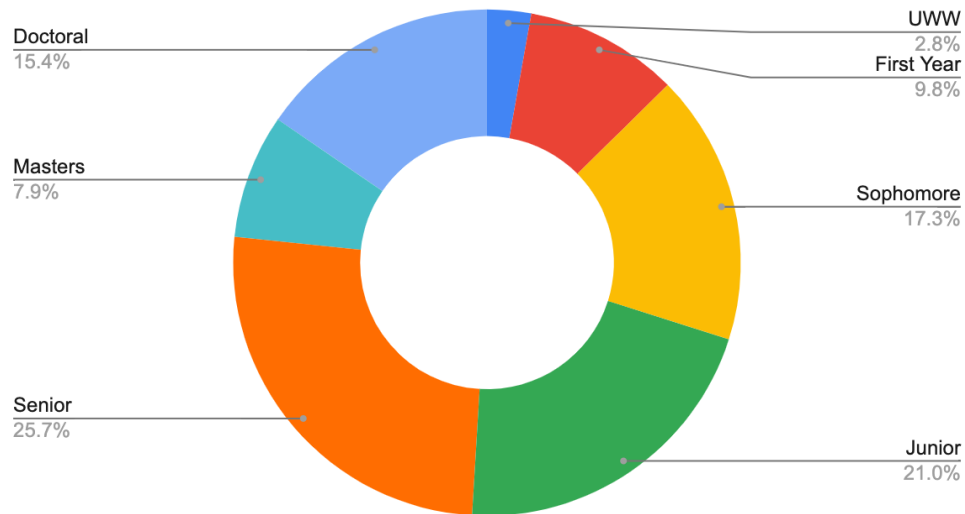
Compared to previous years, FY21 saw a decrease in the percentage of staff visitors and an increase in the percentage of faculty and other instructors. Remote work and staff reductions were likely a factor in the overall low numbers of staff visitors for FY21.

Total Visitors by Role and Year



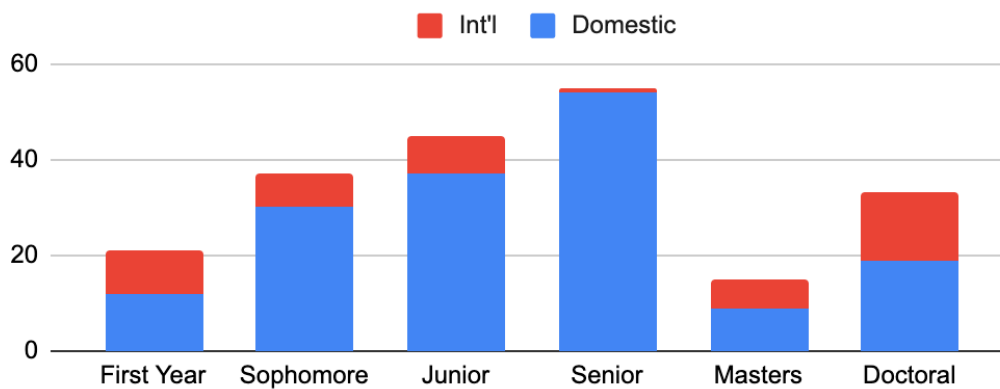
The rate of undergraduate students' usage of the Ombuds Office showed a steady increase as they progressed from initial enrollment toward graduation.

### Visitors: Students



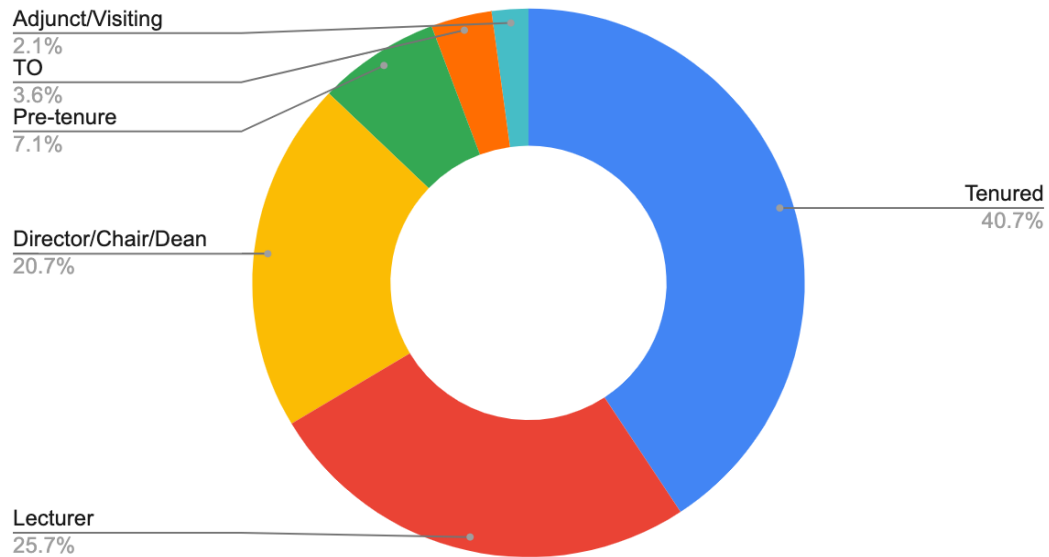
In FY21, international students comprised approximately 11% of the University's student population but made up 23% of the students using ombuds services. The highest percentage of international student visitors was among doctoral students.

### Students: Domestic & International



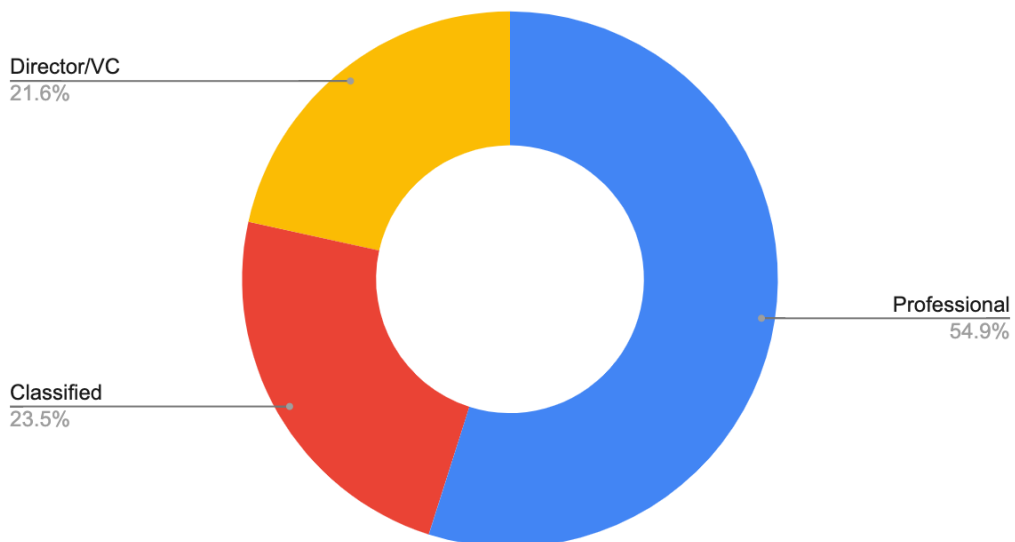
Faculty and other instructors comprised 32.6% of our FY21 visitors. Of these, faculty with tenure were the largest segment (40.7%) followed by lecturers (25.7%) and directors, chairs, and deans (20.7%).

### Visitors: Academic



Staff comprised 12% of our visitors with professional staff as the largest segment.

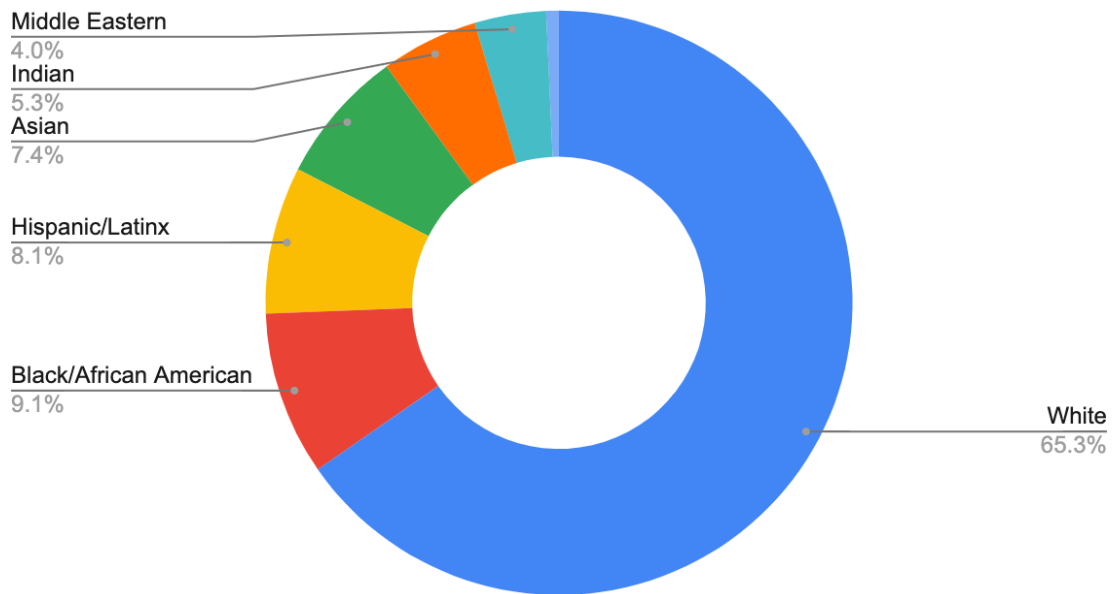
### Visitors: Staff



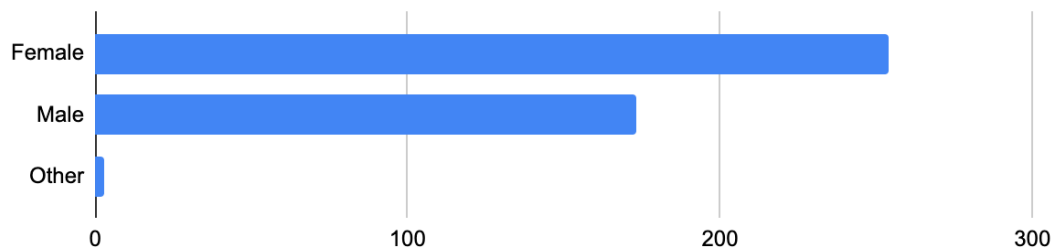
## Visitor Demographics

Most of the information about the race/ethnicity and gender identity of our visitors was self-reported during the intake process. The categories used reflect those responses. Almost 60% of our visitors identified as female and 35% as being of a race/ethnicity other than white.

### Visitors: Race/Ethnicity



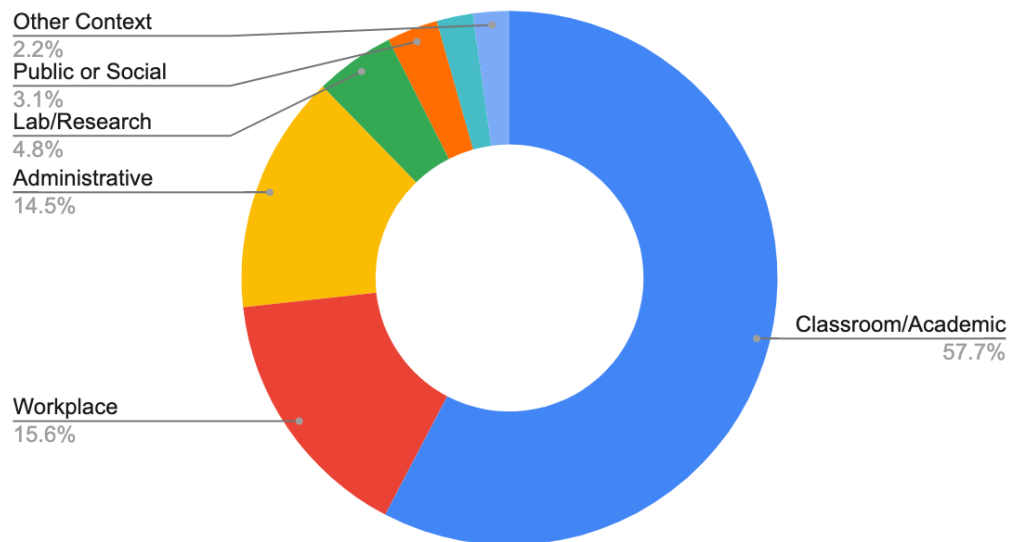
### Visitors: Gender Identity



## Visitor Concerns

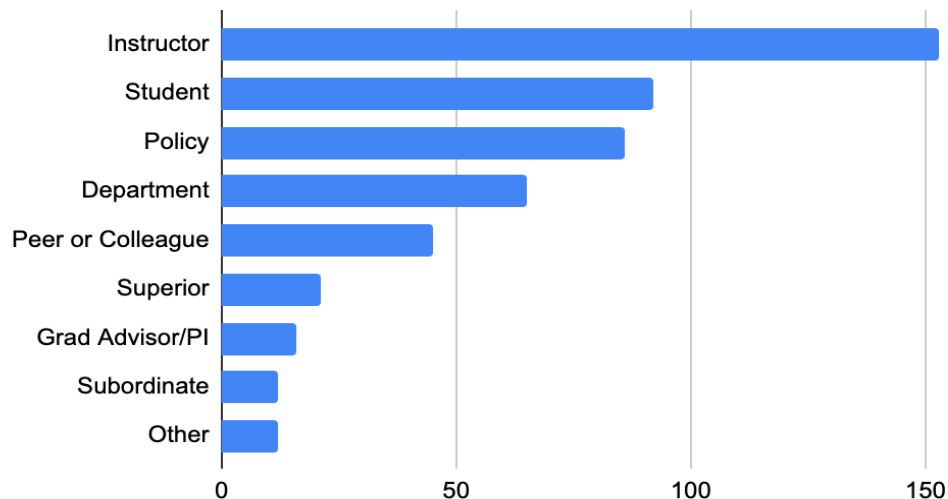
In FY21 we began collecting information on the context of the concerns. Classroom/Academic was by far the largest segment, followed by Workplace and Administrative. We look forward to using this data as a basis for comparison in future years.

### Context of Concern



Visitors were able to report one or more entities of concern, which might include an individual, department, or policy. Below are the totals for the various entities of concern for FY21.

### Entity of Concern



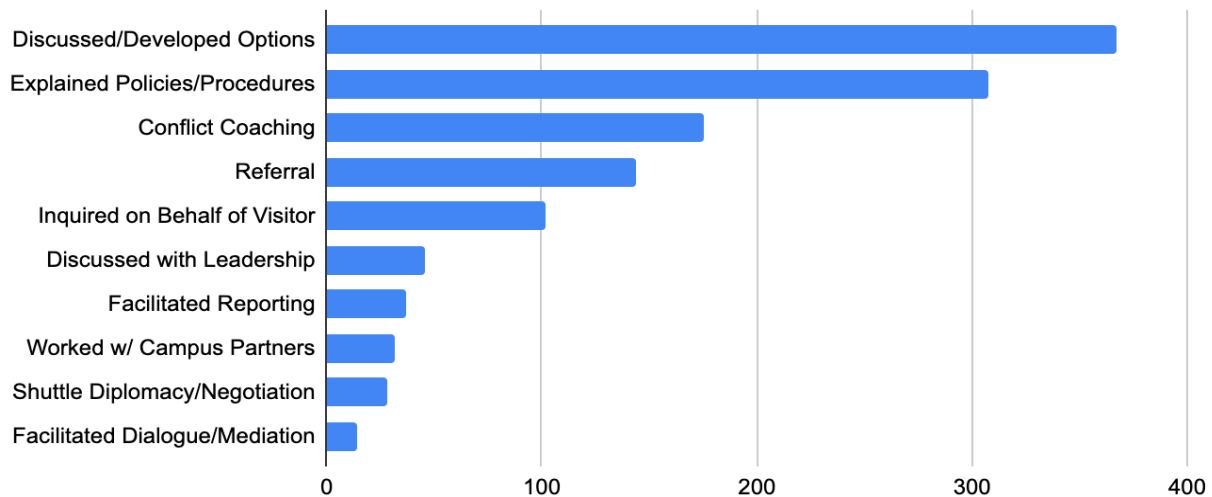
Visitors presented with a range of concerns, many relating to climate, respect, communication, and bias. Also common were concerns about integrity and fairness in academic settings. Visitors often reported more than one concern.

Concern	Total	%
Civility/Respect/Treatment	132	31%
Administrative Decisions/Interpretation of Rules	115	27%
Academic Honesty	102	24%
Communication	95	22%
Academic Grievance/Grading Policy & Practice	85	20%
Abuse of Power/Favoritism/Retaliation	67	16%
Quality of Services/Instruction	66	15%
Climate/Culture	65	15%
Bullying/Harassment	57	13%
COVID-Related	48	11%
Academic Requirements	39	9%
Discrimination/Bias	38	9%
Interpersonal Conflict	31	7%
Responsiveness/Timeliness	22	5%
Absences/Attendance	21	5%
Ethics/Violation of Policy or Law	20	4%
Competence/Performance	20	5%
Workload/Course Requirements	20	5%
Financial Aid/Billing/Fees/Pay/Payroll	18	4%
Concern for Wellbeing/Bystander	16	4%
Technology	15	3%
Other Concerns/Misc.	13	3%
Dismissal/Termination	12	3%
Remote/Hybrid Work	10	2%
Accommodations/ADA	10	2%
Job Change/Reorganization	9	2%
Authorship/IP/Work Product	8	2%
Information Security/Privacy/FERPA	8	2%
Hiring/Promotion	8	2%
Performance Appraisal/Discipline	7	2%
Sexual Assault/Harassment/Misconduct	7	2%
Violence/Assault/Threat/Stalking	7	2%
Late Drop/Retro Withdrawal	6	1%
Health/Safety/Living/Working Conditions	4	1%
Research Sabotage	4	1%

## Ombuds Services

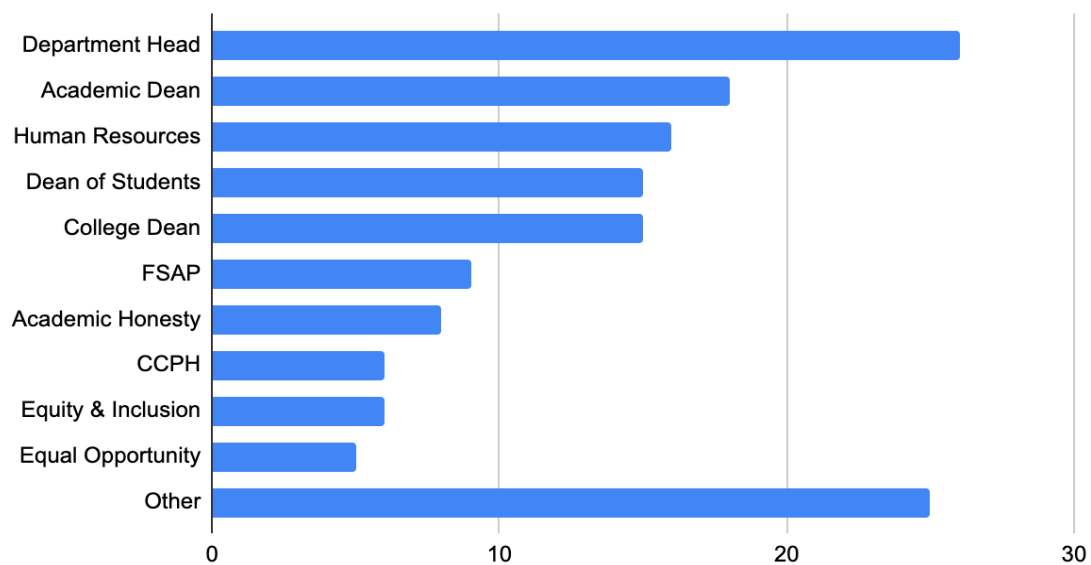
All visitors were informed about the role and standards of the Ombuds Office and had the opportunity to discuss their concern informally and without judgment. The services described below were also provided to visitors in FY21.

### Services Provided

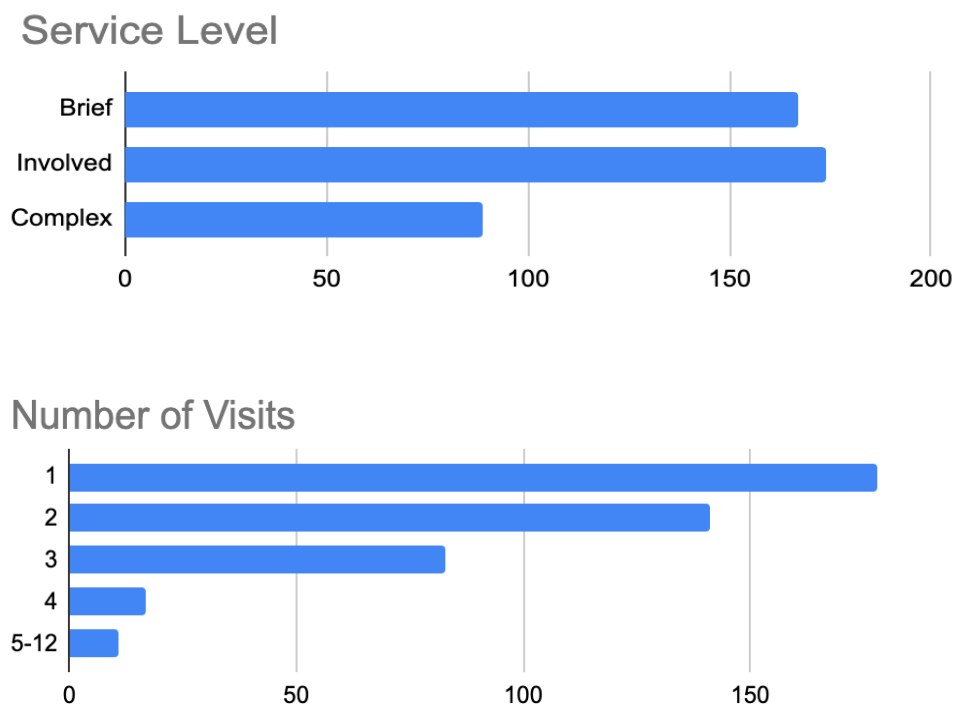


The Ombuds Office provided 144 visitors with referrals to a range of campus resources for solutions, support, or to make a formal report.

### Referrals Made To...



Each matter was designated with a level of service from 1 (brief) to 3 (complex). The number of contacts with visitors ranged from one to twelve.



## TRENDS

At the end of each year the Ombuds Office reviews all cases, seeking to identify trends. Below are the three major trends identified through the concerns of our 430 visitors in FY21.

### The Impact of COVID-19

With the move to remote work and instruction, almost every aspect of campus members' lives and campus operations was impacted. After screening out the many issues that were incidentally related to the pandemic, the Ombuds Office assisted with 48 concerns that were a direct result of COVID. These concerns ranged from a staff member struggling with the decision to disclose an underlying health condition that put them at increased risk to negotiating deadline extensions for a student whose family had contracted the virus. We expect that the pandemic will continue to be a challenge for the campus community, particularly for campus leaders trying to anticipate and balance an endless range of public health and operational concerns.

## **Campus Climate**

Individuals and departments worked to navigate the societal trend of normed incivility along with the larger societal reckoning regarding racist violence, sexual assault, white supremacy, misogyny, and other manifestations of bias. Visitors shared an increased awareness of how general civility, prejudices, and systemic biases shape experiences and relationships on the campus. Examples of Ombuds Office visitors with climate concerns include a new department chair seeking assistance in responding to charges of bias within their department and a group of graduate students identifying favoritism within their lab. There were 132 Ombuds Office visitors who identified “civility, treatment, and/or respect” as a concern, with 65 describing issues with departmental or campus climate/culture and 57 describing feeling individually bullied or harassed. There were 38 visitors who identified discrimination or bias as a dimension of their concern - and these visitors appreciated learning about the expanded range of supportive resources and reporting options available through the University.

## **Academic Honesty Challenges**

There has been a concerning upward trend in reports of academic dishonesty in recent years. The quick pivot to remote instruction amplified this trend as faculty struggled to ensure academic integrity in the online learning environment. In the Fall 2020 semester there were 470 informal resolutions and formal charges - more than triple the number reported in Fall 2019 and more than six times the number reported in Fall 2018. During FY21, 102 faculty and students consulted with the Ombuds Office about academic integrity matters. There were a number of unusually complex cases including several where students submitted evidence of classmates participating in organized online cheating groups. In other cases, students confronted with cheating reacted with threats, insults, or threats of self-harm. Faculty encountering cheating expressed concerns about the potential for conflict, negative teaching evaluations, and the time involved in seeing a charge through the process. These concerns were particularly worrisome for junior and adjunct faculty. Many faculty expressed a desire for the University to play a more active and supportive role in disseminating, upholding, and enforcing academic integrity standards.

## **CONCLUSION**

During FY21 the Ombuds Office served the campus community by providing fully remote services to 430 visitors. As we resume offering in-person appointments we are pleased to increase the accessibility of our services by permanently adding video conferencing to our meeting options. In FY22 we will continue to improve and refine our data collection, increasing our ability to identify emerging issues and provide institutional feedback to campus leaders. We look forward to continuing to work with other resource areas to support a fair, inclusive, and respectful campus climate.