

UMassAmherst

Ombuds Office



FY22 Annual Report

Prepared by Martha Patrick, CO-OP[®], University Ombudsperson
with the assistance of Kristen Farrell, Susan Pearson, and Rolanda Burney

823 Campus Center
University of Massachusetts
Amherst, MA 01003 413-545-0867

www.umass.edu/ombuds

ombuds@umass.edu

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction	2
Mission and Charter	2
Operations	3
Intake Data	4
Visitor Roles	5
Students	6
Faculty	6
Staff	7
Visitor Demographics	8
Concerns: Context	8
Concerns: Entity	9
Concerns: Frequency	9
Services	10
Trends	11
Conclusion	13
Articles	13

Ombuds practice is highly adaptive to the needs of the campus. We listen to concerns, help visitors navigate our complex landscape, educate about the policies and resources of the campus, coach on effective communication, mediate conflicts, facilitate solutions with campus partners, and provide feedback to campus leaders about areas of growth or concern. We are also in a unique position to see the results of the important strides that the campus takes toward continual improvement - as issues are addressed, needed resources are deployed, and processes become more transparent.

INTRODUCTION

The University of Massachusetts Ombuds Office was established on the recommendation of the Faculty Senate in 1969 and began serving our campus in 1970. Ombuds offices are increasingly being embraced as a best practice by higher education and other organizations as the wide-ranging benefits of having an ombuds program are recognized and documented. According to *The Ombuds Blog's* annual news summary, in 2021 there were fifty-eight organizations that created or increased the scope of their ombuds program while only one office was closed. What UMass had the foresight to establish more than a half century ago is increasingly recognized as a best practice for organizations worldwide.

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, and other resolution services. Lastly, the Ombuds Office is an important source of data for organizational improvement, bringing forward general issues of institutional concern.

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 look for patterns among our visitors' concerns. Identifying these patterns gives campus leaders early notice of institutional issues and provides critical support for institutional quality and integrity.**

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.

OPERATIONS

Staffing

In FY22 the Ombuds Office staff included:

- Martha Patrick, University Ombudsperson
- Susan Pearson, Consulting Ombudsperson (part-time)
- Kristen Farrell, Office Manager (part-time)

Historically, the office operated with two to three full-time ombuds and a full- or part-time office manager. In 2020 campus leadership made the decision to reallocate resources and reduce the Ombuds Office staffing level to one full-time ombudsperson, a part-time consulting ombuds, and a part-time office manager. This realignment was conceived to allow the University to embed dedicated dispute resolution practitioners within Academic Affairs and Student Affairs. Planning for these positions is ongoing. 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.

Outreach

During FY22 we hosted information tables at the Graduate Student Resource Fair, International Programs Office Resource Fair, USafe, and in the Student Union lobby for Ombuds Day. We were represented on panels for the Office of Faculty Development and the Graduate School and presented a workshop at the 2022 Human Resources Conference.

Data Collection

In ombuds practice we describe those who use our services as "visitors" to underscore our neutrality. Each visitor is a student, faculty, or staff member who received assistance with a specific conflict or concern. On occasion one individual may contact our office for more than one issue within the same year. This person would be counted a second time for receiving assistance with the second matter.

In FY21 the Ombuds Office expanded data collection in several categories to include the following:

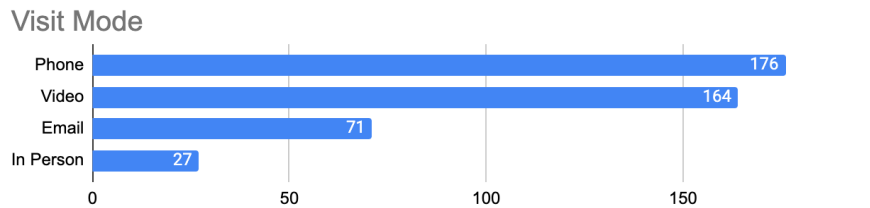
- more detailed information about our visitors' campus roles and social identities,
- the mode of initial meeting and number of contacts,
- the context of the concern (administrative, academic, workplace, etc.),
- more detailed information about the entity of concern, and
- concerns directly related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

We also refined the categories of concerns to 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. FY22 marked the second year of collecting the same data, allowing us to begin year-to-year comparisons across a range of data points. In addition, this year we have included data on our website traffic, inquiries not counted as visitors, and the number of unique visitors throughout the year.

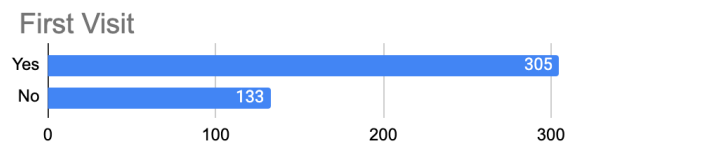
DATA

Intake Data

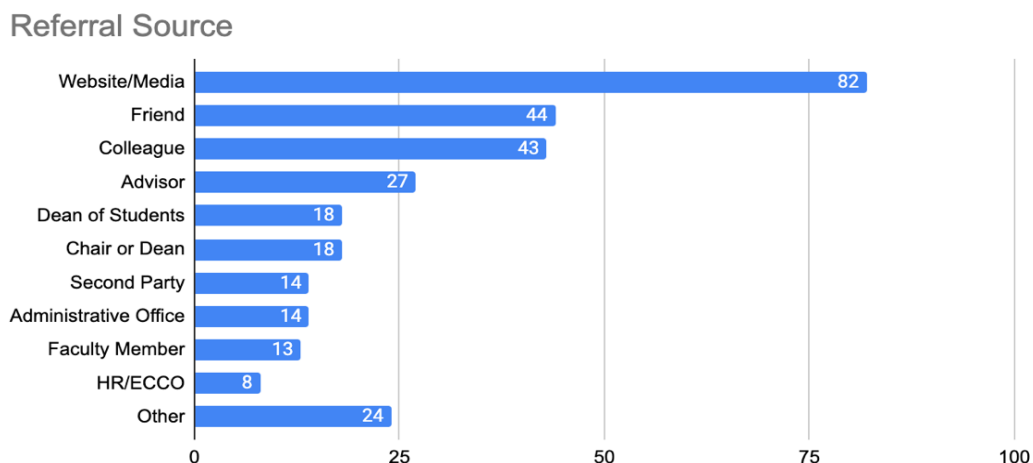
The Ombuds Office provided services to 438 visitors during FY22, up from 430 in FY21. Of the 438 visitor records, 393 were unique users. Video conferencing, introduced when the campus moved to remote operations in FY21, continued to be a popular offering. The Office resumed offering in-person appointments in August 2021 - with 27 visitors opting to meet in person during FY22.



First-time visitors accounted for 70% of our total visitors in FY22. Returning visitors increased from 103 in FY21 to 133 in FY22 - indicating that these repeat visitors found value in our services.



Referrals to our office came from a range of sources. Our website, which offers descriptions of our services and a variety of conflict resolution resources, received 8,212 page views in FY22, up from 6,408 in FY21. Posters and brochures were placed on buses, in academic buildings and administrative offices, and at other strategic locations around the campus. Many first-time visitors reported hearing about our office through word-of-mouth from classmates, colleagues, and friends. In addition, campus offices and administrative leaders made direct referrals to the Office. Other referral sources included unions, supervisors, and mental health counselors.

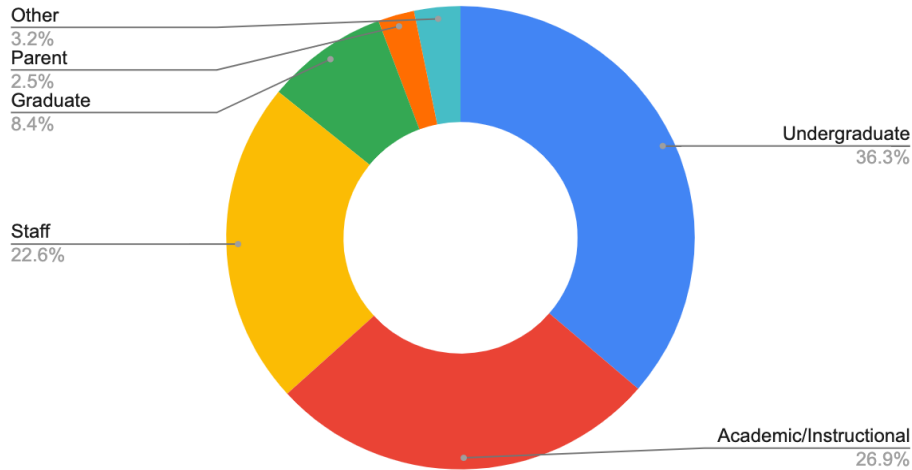


In addition to our reported visitors, there were an additional 65 inquiries - individuals who contacted our office by phone or email and either received the information needed without a formal intake or inquired about our services but did not follow up.

Visitor Roles

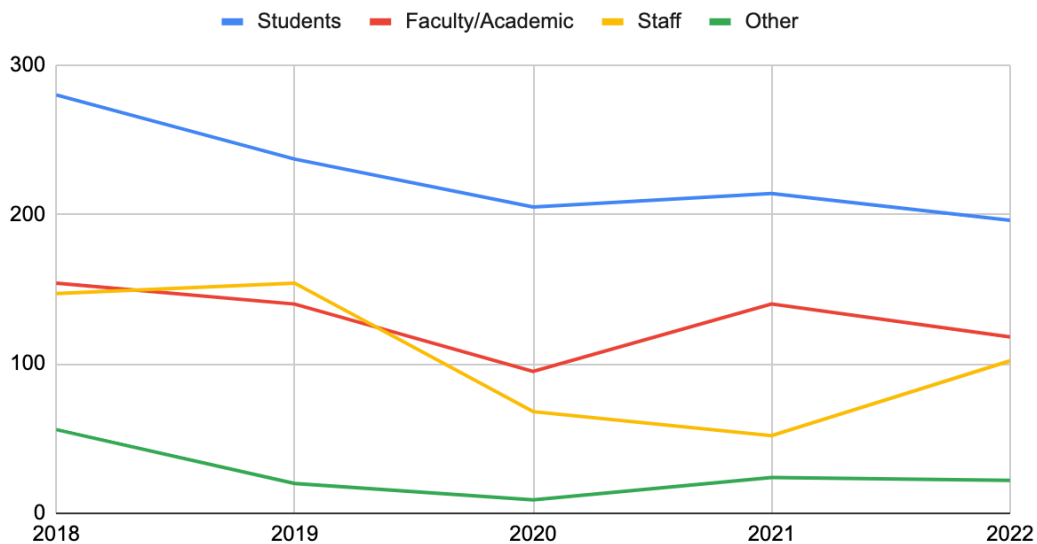
Ombuds Office services are available to all students, faculty, and staff at the University. In FY22 undergraduate students continued to be the largest segment of visitors comprising 36.3%, followed by faculty and other instructors 26.9%, staff 22.6%, graduate students 8.4%, parents 2.5%, and others including alumni 3.2%.

Visitors: University Role



FY22 saw a significant increase in the number of staff visitors - from 51 to 99 - with the greatest increase among professional staff. The return to in-person work and the strain caused by ongoing staffing shortages were likely factors in the overall increase in staff visitors for FY22. There were small decreases in the number of student and faculty visitors.

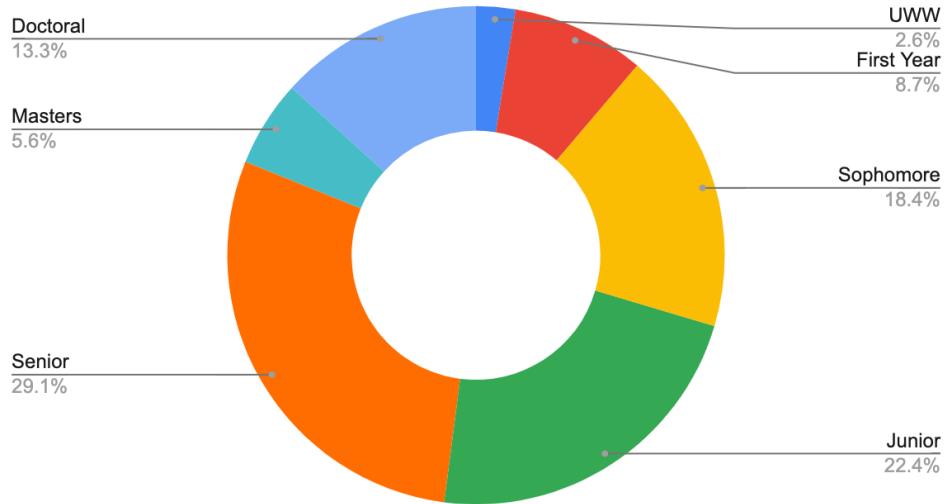
Total Visitors by Role and Year



Students

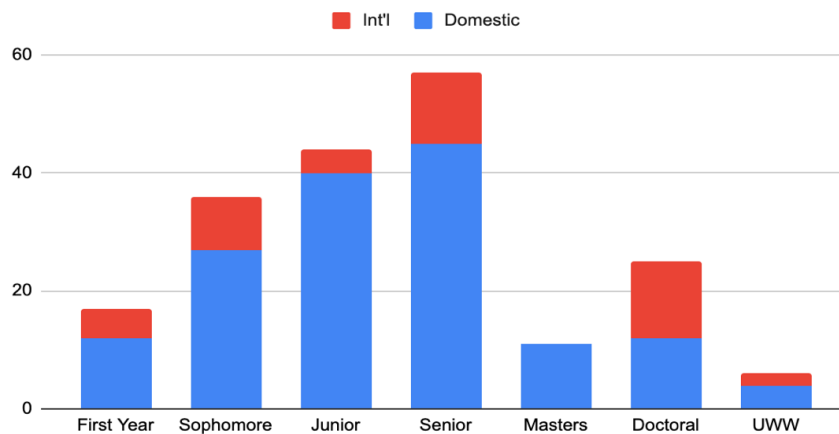
We saw 159 undergraduate student visitors in FY22. The rate of undergraduates' usage of the Ombuds Office continues to show a steady increase as students progress from initial enrollment toward graduation. More than 70% of our graduate student visitors were doctoral students.

Visitors: Students



In FY22, international students were approximately 12% of the University's student population while comprising 23% of the students who used ombuds services. International seniors and doctoral students contacted the Office at more than twice the rate of their domestic counterparts.

Students: Domestic and International

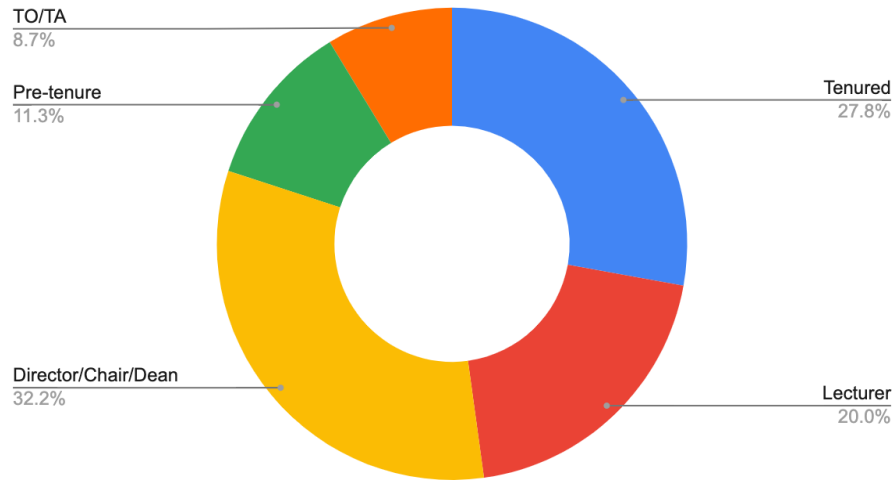


Faculty

Faculty and other academic staff comprised 27% of our FY22 visitors. Of these, directors, chairs, and deans were

the largest segment 32.2%, followed by tenured faculty 27.8%, and lecturers 20%. Pre-tenure faculty were 11.3% of our academic visitors – up from 7% in FY21.

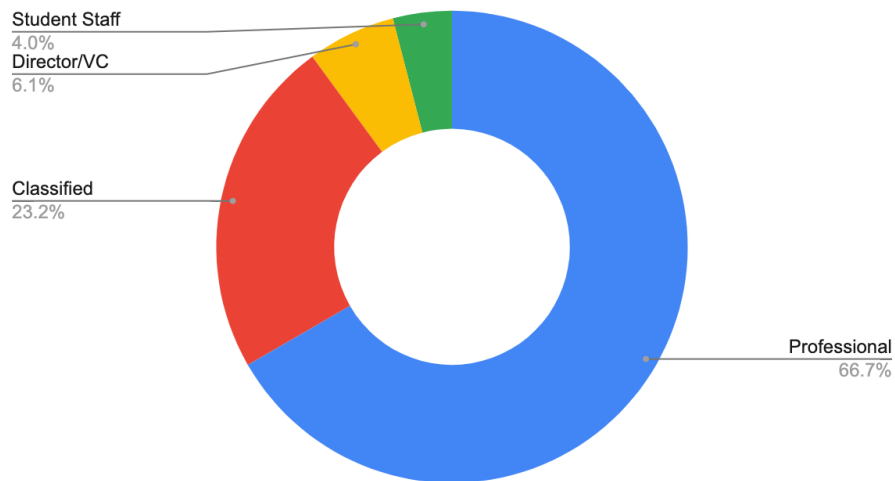
Visitors: Academic



Staff

Staff comprised 22.6% of our visitors, with professional staff as the largest segment at 66.7%. In FY22 we added a new category for student staff, comprising 4% of our staff visitors.

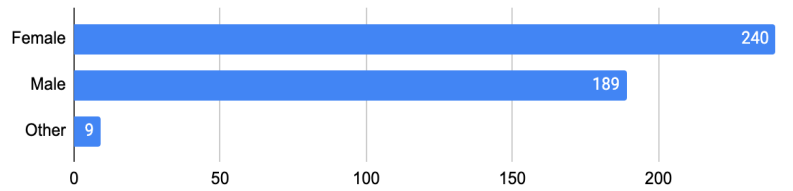
Visitors: Staff



Visitor Demographics

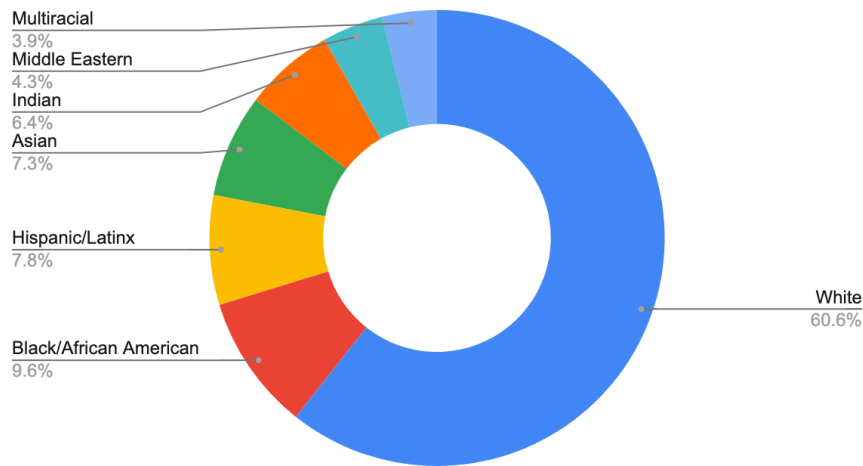
Most of the information about the race/ethnicity and gender identity of our visitors was self-reported during the intake process. The categories used reflect those responses. Almost 55% of our FY22 visitors identified as female, down from the 60% reported in FY21. In FY22 we had 9 visitors who identified as “other” or an identity outside of the gender binary, which was triple that of FY21.

Visitors: Gender Identity



In FY22 almost 40% of our visitors identified as being of a race/ethnicity other than white, an increase from the 35% reported in FY21.

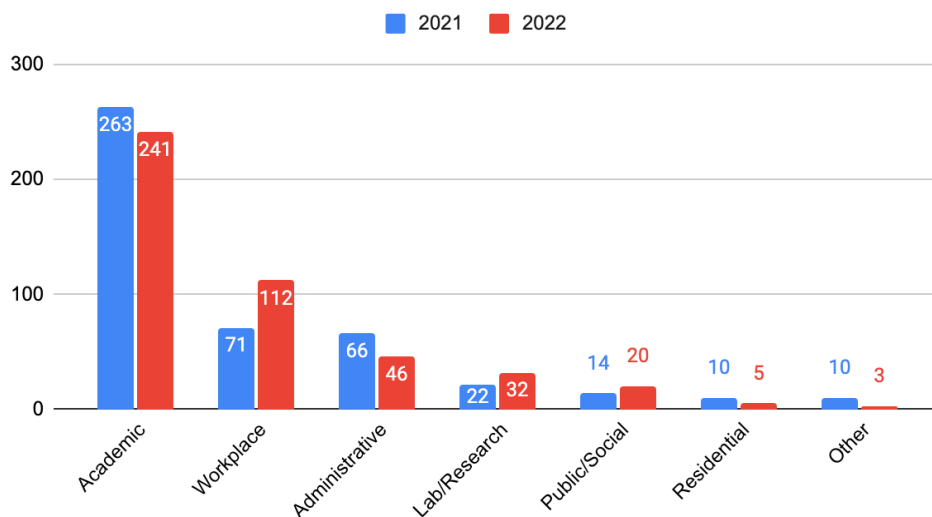
Visitors: Race/Ethnicity



Visitor Concerns

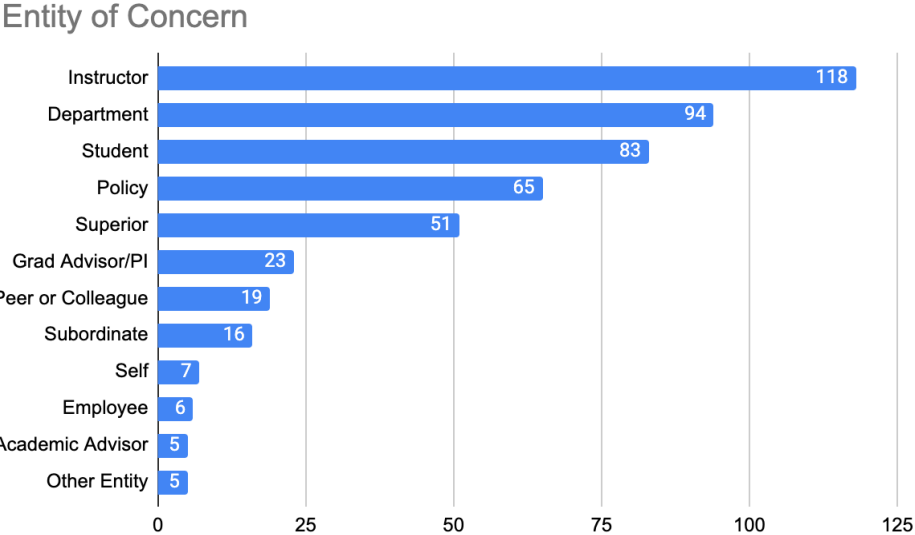
In FY21 we began collecting information on the context of our visitors' concerns, allowing for year-to-year comparisons. In FY22 we saw reductions in the number of concerns related to academics and administrative matters, and increases in concerns related to the workplace, lab/research, and the public/social realm.

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 FY22.

The most notable change from FY21 was a more than two-fold increase in visitor concerns regarding a “superior.” These concerns were generally related to disrespectful treatment, favoritism, or bullying in the workplace by people in positions of authority - be they front-line supervisors, department heads, or PIs.



Visitors presented with a range of concerns, many relating to communication, climate, respect, and bias. Also common were concerns about integrity and fairness in academic settings. Visitors often raised more than one concern. Substantial changes from FY21 data are noted as such: (+) denotes > 20% increase in concerns; (-) denotes > 20% decrease.

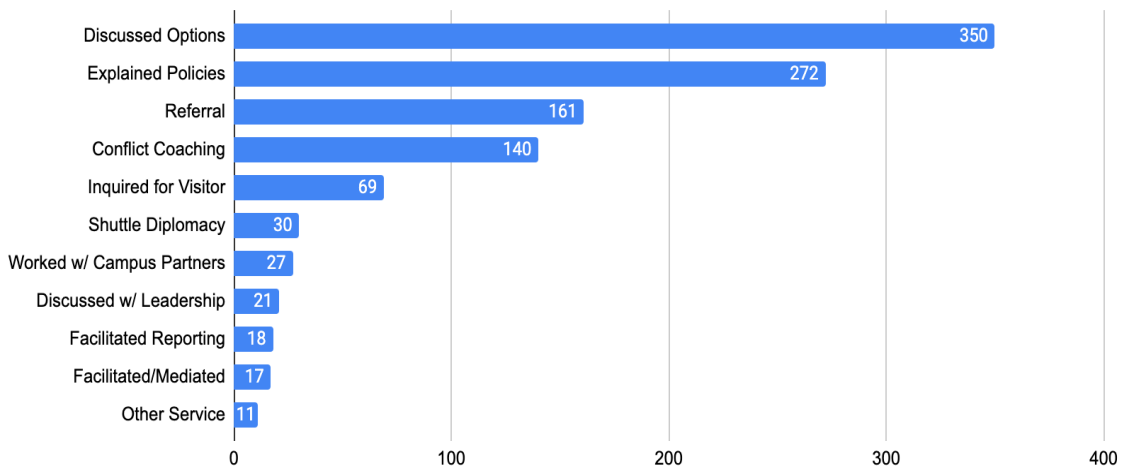
Concern	Total FY22
Administrative Decisions/Interpretation of Rules	122
Communication (+)	122
Civility/Respect/Treatment (-)	100
Academic Grievance/Grading Policy and Practice	97
Climate/Culture	72
Academic Honesty (-)	71
Abuse of Power/Favoritism/Retaliation (-)	51
Bullying/Harassment (-)	46
Academic Requirements/Admission/Continuation/Graduation	43
Quality of Services/Instruction (-)	42
Ethics/Violation of Policy or Law (+)	33
COVID Related (-)	29
Accommodations/ADA (+)	29
Responsiveness/Timeliness (+)	28
Discrimination/Bias (-)	26

Absences/Attendance	26
Workload/Course Requirements (+)	25
Concern for Another's Wellbeing/Bystander (+)	24
Competence/Performance	22
Interpersonal Conflict (-)	21
Financial Aid/Billing/Fees/Payroll	20
Performance Appraisal/Discipline (+)	18
Other Concern	17
Hiring/Promotion (+)	11
Authorship/Intellectual Property/Work Product (+)	10
Dismissal/Termination (-)	9
Job Change/Reorganization	9
Information Security/Privacy/FERPA/HIPAA	8
Sexual Assault/Sexual Harrassment/Sexual Misconduct (-)	6
Late Drop/Retro Withdrawal	5
Health/Safety/Living/Working Conditions (-)	3
Remote/Hybrid (-)	3
Technology (-)	3
Violence/Assault/Threat/Stalking (-)	3

Ombuds Services

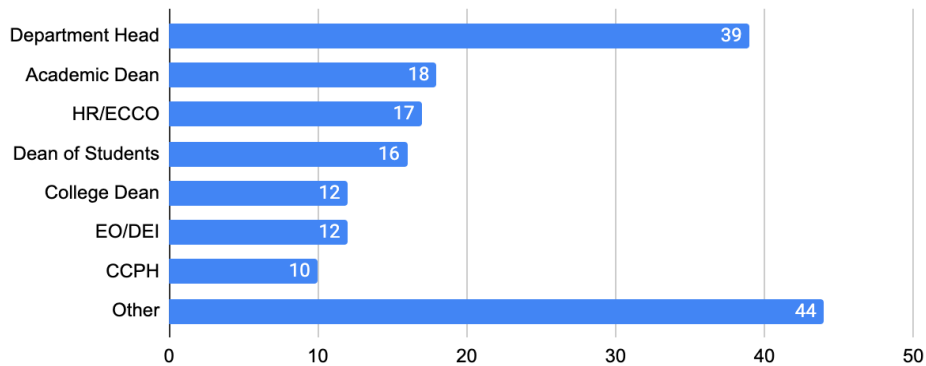
All visitors were informed of the role and standards of the Ombuds Office and had the opportunity to discuss their concerns confidentially, informally, and without judgment. The services described below were also provided to visitors in FY22.

Services Provided



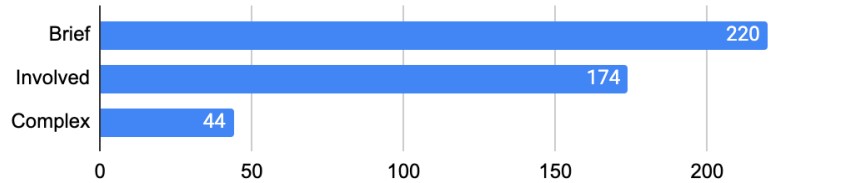
The Ombuds Office provided 161 visitors with referrals to a range of campus resources for solutions, support, or to make a formal report.

Referrals Made To...

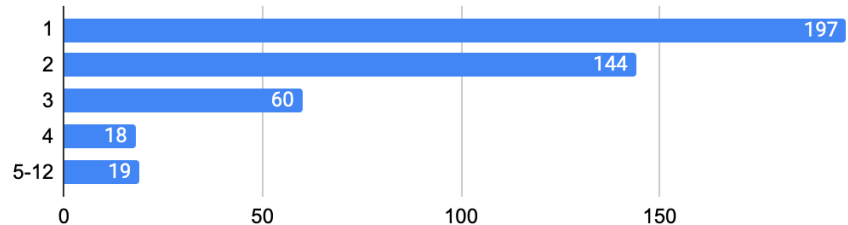


Each matter was designated with a level of service from 1 (brief) to 3 (complex). The number of contacts with visitors ranged from one to twelve.

Service Level



Number of Visits



FY22 TRENDS

At the end of each year the Ombuds Office reviews all cases, seeking to identify emerging patterns and trends. Below are the trends identified through the concerns of our visitors in FY22.

Staffing

Staffing challenges, a national problem, featured prominently in the concerns brought to the Office in FY22. Senior staff members with valuable expertise were lost to retirement or resignation during the pandemic and have been difficult to replace. As a result, many current staff expressed concerns about increased workload and the strain and uncertainty of covering for vacant positions. Another staffing concern was related to long-term interim leadership appointments or interim appointments that have been extended. Staff perceived that these

leaders lack the confidence and institutional standing to effectively take the reins, address difficult issues, and make needed changes in their areas while serving on an interim basis. Supervisors struggled with performance issues as staff struggled with motivation and work/life balance. On a positive note, the campus' responsiveness in offering hybrid options and/or flexible schedules where feasible was appreciated by many and was described as a significant factor in the retention of existing staff.

Mental Health

In addition to the conflicts or concerns that spurred visitors to seek our services, many described experiencing anxiety, depression, or other mental health challenges. The majority of these visitors indicated that they were already connected with counseling services. Those not currently under the care of a clinician were offered a referral. For some individuals, mental health concerns exacerbated the challenge of communicating or responding effectively to conflict, change, or adversity when it arose. We were able to offer these individuals communication and conflict coaching while providing a range of practical strategies to reduce stress and improve relationships. The number of visitors who contacted our office out of concern for another's well-being increased by 50% in FY22. We view this increase as a positive indication of a strong and growing ethic of care in our campus community.

Going Public with Grievances

Over the past several years there has been a concerning trend of campus grievances being aired in the public realm. Rather than addressing issues directly or through the numerous formal and informal channels provided by the campus, the aggrieved parties have resorted to public vilification through social media, online petitions, posts to websites, and concerted gossip.

UMass offers a wide array of grievance processes including those outlined in our collective bargaining agreements; the Principles of Employee Conduct; the Code of Student Conduct; the Academic Grievance Procedures; the Graduate Student Academic Grievance Procedures; the Workplace Bullying Grievance Procedure; and others. Individuals can make reports or complaints through their union; the Dean of Students Office; Human Resources; the Equal Opportunity and Access Office; the Office of Equity and Inclusion; the Research Compliance Office; the Associate Chancellor for Compliance; and more. In addition to the Ombuds Office, there are numerous other informal channels where members of the campus community can raise concerns - such as supervisors, RDs, GPDs, department heads, deans, vice chancellors, and other campus leaders.

Back-channel approaches to conflict can have a devastating effect on the individuals involved and on the campus community as a whole. Grievances taken public are inherently one-sided and cannot be rescinded - they undermine opportunities for the individuals involved to learn and grow, and for relationships to be repaired. The substance of legitimate concerns becomes obscured by the manner of their expression. Needless to say, once a grievance is taken up in the public realm it becomes extremely difficult for the Ombuds Office or other campus entities to help facilitate a resolution.

In order to address this trend it is critical that the campus bolster its efforts to inform all students, faculty, and staff of the full range of available channels for support and grievance. By ensuring that these channels are widely understood and accessible we will increase the likelihood that aggrieved parties will utilize appropriate means rather than resorting to harmful approaches. The Ombuds Office will continue to inform our visitors about the many formal and informal options for constructively surfacing, reporting, and resolving grievances, and we suggest a campus-wide effort to disseminate this type of information more broadly.

Disability Accommodations

Visitor concerns about academic accommodations nearly tripled in FY22 as students returned from fully remote learning to in-person classes. Faculty and students alike reported confusion regarding their rights and responsibilities related to disability accommodation in the classroom. Some students reported not receiving their stipulated accommodations for remote instruction, notes, absences, and extended deadlines. Some faculty felt that students' demands were unreasonable, that students had not communicated proactively, or that the flexibility they had built into their syllabus excused them from providing additional accommodations. While some student visitors requested information about pursuing a formal grievance, the Ombuds Office was able to help facilitate resolutions in a number of cases by helping both students and faculty understand their obligations and facilitating communication between the parties. There is hope that the University's development of [UMass Flex](#) may offer solutions to these concerns as students with accommodations would have more options to learn at the pace and in the modality that works best for them.

CONCLUSION

During FY22 the Ombuds Office served the campus community by providing confidential, impartial, and informal conflict resolution services to 438 visitors. In the coming year we will continue to expand and refine our data collection, increasing our ability to spot trends, identify emerging issues, and provide important institutional feedback to campus leaders. We look forward to continuing to work with other resource areas to support a fair, inclusive, and respectful campus.

Recent articles discussing ombuds programs and practice:

[Alternative Complaint Systems for Harassment and Discrimination Disputes](#)

[Ombuds offer colleges conflict resolution in a contentious time | Higher Ed Dive](#)

[Survey Results on Creating Academic Ombuds Offices: An Analysis and Extrapolation of Comments from Working Academic Ombuds](#)