

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, one for each ombuds. The first section details the visitors, action, issues, and patterns from the graduate and professional student (GPS) ombuds, and the second describes the visitors, actions, 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 fourth annual report emanating from the GPS ombuds and covers the period from August 15, 2024 through August 14, 2025. 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. Within the university, they also met with SARNCO OSU Campus Advocacy Coordinator, Elizabeth Sabo, and Community Building and Conflict Resolution representative Sara Childers. The ombuds support each other's development by meeting regularly, sometimes reading and discussing books related to their work.

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. Moreover, they 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.

Last year, the GPS ombuds served 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 2024–2025, the GPS ombuds participated as a panelist on several sessions on student success geared towards graduate students and faculty such as the Accessibility Stakeholders' Symposium organized by the Council of Graduate Students and the ASC Graduate Studies Kick-Off Meeting. The GPS ombuds also engaged in outreach throughout campus to promote their services and connect with

key people in the university community including 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 OAA new faculty orientation and the College of Medicine Education Leadership Team. In spring 2025, the GPS ombuds developed a workshop for graduate and professional students on “Navigating conflict and difficult conversations” that she offered as part of the Wellness Wednesdays series by the Students Wellness Center and led a session on the topic as part of the course Grad School 8000: The Responsible Conduct of Research.

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.

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, Counselling and Consultation Services, and the Civil Rights Compliance Office. The ombuds would like to thank those individuals that provided counsel and helped make the ombuds’ work possible and more efficient.

From August 15, 2024 to August 14, 2025, the GPS ombuds heard concerns from 134 visitors. 111 visitors were students, of which 102 were graduate students (M.A. or Ph.D. students), 8 were professional students, and 1 was a dual-degree (professional and graduate) student. There were 8 other visitors who were not graduate or professional students but wanted to discuss issues that pertain to those students, including 3 faculty members, 2 graduate program coordinators, 1 director of graduate studies, 1 student advocate (from Student Advocacy), and 1 counsellor (from CCS). In addition, there were 7 postdocs and 1 resident. Finally, there were 7 visitors that wanted to discuss undergraduate matters, including 6 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 Business or Optometry) and 5 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. In addition, some discussions took place exclusively via email. Around half of the meetings required follow-ups, oftentimes via email. In several cases (24), 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 4 group meetings as observer and 2 group meetings as mediator.

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 103 visitors,
- Identified and clarified issues with 66 visitors,

- Provided information to 49 visitors,
- Coached ways of navigating conflicts with 34 visitors,
- Provided a referral to a university resource for 13 visitors, and
- Looked into issues for 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, PIs and other faculty
 - Fear of retribution if they speak up
 - Issues with other graduate students or lab members
 - Issues with graduate exams
 - Issues with graduate classes and instructors
 - Issues with internship placements/clinical assignments
 - Issues related to GTA responsibilities and teaching
 - Issues with Ohio residency for tuition purposes
 - Issues with the COAM process
 - Vulnerability of international students
- Information regarding:
 - Grade grievances
 - Filing a formal complaint
 - Sources of funding
 - Health insurance
 - Co-authorship
- Guidance and advice with:
 - Changing advisors
 - Appeal processes in professional schools
 - Grievance process with the Graduate School
 - COAM violations
 - LOA and unexpected implications/complications
 - Leaving their program and telling their advisor

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 passive-aggressiveness 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 "tools" for research. 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. 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; many of these students waited until after graduation to look into this option. In many situations, students had lost trust in their advisors/PIs and did not think they had their best interests in mind. Their perception was that advisors were not treating them fairly and with respect.

When discussing issues with advisors, some students were concerned about the lack of balance between their GRAship responsibilities and their coursework and the fact that their PIs did not support them taking classes (even if they were program requirements). Other students discussed conflict with their PIs/advisors while being on a university fellowship stemming from not clear guidelines as to what their contributions to lab work should be (not being on a GRAship). There were also cases where students questioned how they had been graded on U/S research hours and described a lack of structure or guidelines for expectations.

An issue that became apparent in several cases is that students had received a negative evaluation, an U in research hours or had been told they'd be placed on probation but there was a lack of document of concerns by advisors. In some cases, there were no annual reviews where concerns had been raised.

In addition, several students talked about their advisors' lack of understanding of mental health issues and the accommodations needed. Other students described difficulty in navigating the need for accommodations both in graduate classes and also in their work as GTAs or GRAs.

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 – this turned out to be very difficult in most cases. Some other students were seeking new advisors

because their previous one had left OSU—these students highlighted their difficult position, oftentimes having to navigate politics among faculty members.

Some 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.

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.

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, especially having their funding cut short without any warning. Some students were not aware of the funding package they had been offered when accepted into their programs which contributed to the confusion.

Some students faced challenges when pursuing a grade grievance because their departments did not have a process for it, even though the university grade grievance guidelines say that department might have to get involved. This led to delays in the overall process.

Some students were concerned about major program changes in their department that were not well received by students, whose input had not been sought out to make decisions.

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.

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

The faculty ombuds sought guidance and advice from several offices including: the Office of Academic Affairs, Employee Labor Relations, the Employee Assistance Program, the former Office

of Institutional Equity (which is the current Office of Civil Rights Compliance), the Office of Legal Affairs, The OSU Police Department, 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.

From August 15, 2024 to August 14, 2025, the faculty ombudsperson heard concerns and issues from 99 visitors, plus one collective of approximately 15 people¹. The number of visitors was down from 122 last year². The visitors in the 24-25 school year included those from three campuses, those working remotely, and those working at other universities. Visitors represented 10 colleges. There were no visitors from the Fisher College of Business, the Moritz College of Law, the College of Optometry, the John Glenn College of Public Affairs, and the College of Public Health. Many meetings with visitors were in person or virtual. Some were on phone. A few were solely on email, but email was often used as a follow-up to other meetings.

Among the 99 visitors, 86 were faculty, and 57 were tenure track faculty. Among the tenure track faculty, 15 were ranked assistant professors, 22 associate, and 20 full. Of the remaining faculty, 17 were clinical/teaching/practice faculty, 1 was research faculty, and 11 were associated faculty, including lecturers, visiting faculty, and extension faculty. 6 of the 86 faculty also held administrative positions. 5 visitors were in fully administrative roles. There were 8 other visitors, including a post doc, a former student, staff, and a parent of a student.

The faculty ombuds sent surveys, via email, to first-time visitors who were faculty to get a sense of the diversity of those using the services of the ombuds. Visitors who did not contact the ombuds by email were not sent surveys. 56 surveys were sent out. 43 visitors replied. 19% identified as international, 9% as among LGBTQ+ communities, 7% as having a disability, and 5% as being a veteran. Of those who identified their gender, 61% identified as female and 39% as male. Of those who identified their race or ethnicity, 71% identified as white, Caucasian of European American; 20% identified as Asian, Asian Indian, or Asian-American; 3% identified as

¹ I counted this collective as a single visit, but the individuals are not included among the total number of visitors.

² In 23-24, I documented every visitor, including those who were not faculty or even affiliated with the university. I started doing this in 24-25, but, one month in, I stopped documenting visitors from outside of the university because their visits seemed irrelevant for the report. I have deleted visitors from approximately the first month who are unaffiliated with the university in this year's report, for consistency's sake. This may explain the drop in numbers of visitors from last year's report to this year's, since, as an example, in the first month of the 24-25 year, I had 22 visitors; 15 of these were from within the university, and 5 were from outside of it. Some of these are patients or family members of patients in our hospitals, but others are family members of people in retirement communities, hospitals, halfway houses, prisons, and other institutions around the state. For those people, I generally listen, empathize, and point them to other resources. I should note that there is some gray area between those affiliated and not affiliated with the university. These include family member of a member of the university or someone from another university concerned about a member of our university. I have included those visitors in this report. That the drop in numbers is tied to a change in record keeping is supported by the fact that the number of visitors who are faculty is up from 81 to 86 from last to this year.

Latinx, Hispanic, or Chicano; 3% identified as biracial; and 3% identified as multiracial. Respondents also stated how they heard about the Office of the Ombuds. Most of them heard about it from a colleague or mentor, many found out about it with an online search, several said they relied on institutional knowledge, and several others said they learned about it in a presentation.

To serve the 99 visitors, plus those in the collective, the faculty ombuds participated in over 248³ 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. 37 visitors came multiple times, ranging from just 2 visits to as many as 30. In some instances, multiple visitors from a single unit came forth with a shared concern.

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 80 visitors,
- Identified and clarified issues with 62 visitors,
- Referred resources to 55 visitors,
- Provided information to 44 visitors,
- Coached ways of navigating conflicts with 38 visitors,
- Looked into issues for 20 visitors,
- Observed discussions for 5 visitors,
- Provided upward feedback on behalf of 2 visitors, and
- Facilitated or mediated 1 group discussion.

The issues brought to the faculty ombuds roughly fall into eight categories.

- About 30%⁴ of visitors came with concerns related to challenging interactions with supervisors. Examples of these concerns included negotiating salaries and spaces, managing transfers, supporting growth opportunities, following procedures and policies, assigning courses, mediating conflicts, shifting workloads, and fears of belittling, harassing, threatening behavior. Concerns related to challenging interactions with supervisors were the most prominent issue, by far.
- About 18% of visitors came seeking information and resources. They sought information about methods for reporting, promotion and tenure procedures and policies, how to pursue salary equity, resources for facilitation and mediation, and practices of search committees, among others.
- About 15% of visitors conveyed concerns about challenging interactions with colleagues. Sometimes these tensions were around teaching or research, but often they were about overall climate.

³ This is up from 154 last year.

⁴ The total percentage is higher than 100 because some visitors came with multiple concerns.

- About 12% of visitors were navigating negative evaluations, complaints, and investigations.
- About 11% of visitors were concerned about shifting job expectations. This happened when faculty's percentages of labor were adjusted, when POAs were revised, and when faculty started a new position.
- About 6% of visitors struggled with the impact of larger sociopolitical issues, particularly the passing and implementation of SB1, or the "Advance Ohio Higher Education Act."
- About 6% of visitors conveyed concerns about challenging interactions with staff. Some faculty felt dismissed by staff, while others felt protective of staff, as examples.
- About 5% of visitors conveyed concerns about challenging interactions with students. Sometimes faculty were searching for ways to support students, but other times they were looking for ways to manage them.

Two categories that were foregrounded in last year's report but not this year's are changing dynamics within the unit and scholarship hindered by institutional processes. It is not that these concerns have disappeared, but they have been subsumed within discussions of SB1.

As in recent years, most concerns were related to challenging interactions with supervisors. Shifting job expectations continued to be a concern, but not as pronounced as in recent years. A noticeable additional concern is the impact of SB1.

Conclusions

There are some common themes across the issues expressed by visitors to both ombuds. Both constituents conveyed concern about conflicts with supervisors, whether those were advisors and PIs or chairs and deans. Both groups also struggled with workloads, being asked to do more than was reasonable, fair, or than expected. Both groups came to ombuds for help navigating negative evaluations, whether those were coming from students, colleagues, or administrators. Finally, both groups came to the ombuds to find information on processes, policies, rules, and procedures for various parts of their academic lives.