

2022 ANNUAL REPORT
FACULTY OMBUDS
WEST CHESTER UNIVERSITY





NOTE FROM THE OMBUDS

WCU's Ombudsperson Office was established in March of 2020, having been advocated for by our Faculty Senate, supported by upper administration, and approved of by our faculty union, APSCUF.

I am proud and honored to be in my third year of serving our university community as the inaugural Faculty Ombudsperson. My first annual report, available on the Faculty Ombuds website (<https://www.wcupa.edu/viceProvost/facultyOmbuds/default.aspx>), encapsulated my first 16 months on the job (March 2020–June 2021). This annual report, and all those going forward, will be a normal 12-month report, following the university's fiscal year.

I attended the International Ombuds Association's Annual Conference this past April (for the third year in a row), and came away with many fascinating insights and additional tools for my ombudsing toolbox. I was humbled to be in the (virtual) room with ombudspersons for organizations from all over the world, like the International Red Cross, UNESCO, the World Bank; for governments from around the globe; and for state governments in the US, major metropolitan areas, and for federal agencies, like the US Department of Energy, US Marshals Service, US Department of Justice, etc.; and many exemplary academic institutions. Fingers crossed that next year's conference will be in person!

In what follows I will report on anonymized data that demonstrates how the ombuds office is being of service to "visitors"—the word used in ombuds practice for those seeking the assistance of the office. I will report on the Faculty Ombuds Office Survey that gathered data from the first 16 months of the office. I will describe the programming and events that conversations coming through the Ombuds Office inspire.

I have been enriched by the working relationships that have developed out of the operation of the Faculty Ombuds Office. So, a special thank

you to WCU APSCUF President Margaret Ervin, and Grievance Chair Christy Hicks. And, to Faculty Associate of the Teaching, Learning, and Assessment Center Janneken Smucker; and Faculty Senate President Julie Wiest.

As one of the roles of the faculty ombuds is to "offer recommendations for positive change" in our organization, I am grateful to Deputy Provost Jeff Osgood for his open door and welcoming ear.

And, I want to thank Vicki McGinley, for being such talented back-up for the Faculty Ombuds office. As the alternative ombuds, she has proven useful on numerous fronts, and I appreciate her thoughtfulness and her expertise.

Joan Woolfrey, WCU Faculty Ombuds

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report contains anonymized information about how the Office of the Faculty Ombuds has assisted mainly faculty since June 2021. The office will produce a report annually to communicate to the university community what our office does and how it is of value. This report also summarizes the kinds of activities sponsored or co-organized by the Ombuds Office. And, it delineates next steps for the Ombuds office as it works to improve its offerings and its functioning to best serve our campus community.

Anonymized Information

From the first of July 2021 to the end of June of this year, the WCU's Faculty Ombuds Office served 112 unique visitors. (Ombuds' best practice refreshes the count each month, so that 112 could include visitors who have come repeatedly to the ombuds office, sometimes for a variety of different reasons, sometimes for updated aspects of the original concern. Those visitors remain in the minority of the count.)

Compared to the first 16 months of the availability of the ombuds office when there were 57 unique visitors, the almost doubling of visitors in the next 12 months positively reflects on the worth of the office and the increasing visibility — and spreading knowledge of the existence of — the Faculty Ombuds. In the first 16 months of the office, the ombuds clocked 113 hours of conversations with visitors. For the 112 visitors reporting in the most recent 12 months, 83 hours were spent in conversation with visitors and contacts. ("Contacts" are those the ombuds reaches out to in service of the conversations with visitors.) There is a notable 30 hour difference between the first report and this

past year's, despite hosting more visitors, which simply indicates some differences in the needs of visitors between the two time periods.

As mentioned in the first annual report, using the International Ombuds Association's Reporting Categories, Peer and Colleague Relationships are by far the most common issues visitors bring to the office. That trend continued this past year. Some of the interpersonal issues arose between faculty and staff, some surfaced between faculty and their chair, most — unsurprisingly — were peer-to-peer. Those peer-to-peer conflicts can be the most stressful when they're between junior and more senior-ranking faculty — thus our plans for some programming on anti-bullying in the coming academic year.

Survey Data

At the beginning of the 2020-21 school year, the Faculty Ombuds Office (from here on "Ombuds Office") sent out a survey asking those who had contact with the Ombuds to report on their satisfaction with the services provided. Of the 57 visitors who had come through the office since its

inception, 32 responded (56% response rate). Of the 27 who responded to the question about overall satisfaction with the Ombuds Office, 19 were extremely satisfied, two were somewhat satisfied, five were neutral and one was extremely dissatisfied.* The Ombuds Office will work methodically into the future to identify and address any possible reasons for this dissatisfaction. At the same time, it is heartening to see the work of the Ombuds generally well-received.

One key highlight of the survey data is in answer to the question "What action would you have taken" if you hadn't gone to the Ombuds Office? Three respondents chose "file a lawsuit, grievance or complaint" and three chose "Leave WCU." Those numbers speak strongly to the need for the office, and the value of the work. Further discussion of the survey results appears on page 5.

Co-sponsored Activities & Events

Working with the Teaching, Learning and Assessment Center (TLAC) proves a very fruitful pairing. With Dr. Janneken Smucker, the Faculty Associate for TLAC, we held Open Forums early in the term to see what was on faculty members' minds regarding their fall classroom experience, as we were back in person for the most part for Fall 2021 after eighteen months of remote teaching.

Because of those conversations and others coming through the Ombuds Office and being held in other parts of the university, we also co-hosted one fall and one spring semester event on academic freedom, and a well-attended virtual forum entitled "A Discussion on Alternatives to SRIS." In addition, the Ombuds Office organized and facilitated an event with Deputy Provost Jeff Osgood and local APSCUF president Margaret Ervin on the worth of department by-laws, which are not mandated by any formal university rule and run the risk of conflicting with the union's Collective Bargaining Agreement if care is not taken.

** I will note that there was one person who took the survey who admitted not having used the Faculty Ombuds office, who seems to be unhappy with the existence of the office itself. Perhaps there is a connection.*



The role of an ombudsperson is three-fold: to listen; to help visitors strategize and empower them to find solutions to issues and concerns; and, to report anonymized patterns, trends, and concerns, and recommend actions or policy changes consistent with those patterns and trends.

Co-sponsored events

Coming out of the remote teaching mode and back into the classroom while the pandemic still simmered challenged (and will continue to challenge) many of us. In the past academic year, we saw our students struggling more than before the pandemic with mental health issues, absences, and, for some, sluggish motivation to re-commit to their studies. Faculty needed a way to check in about options and brainstorm about responses. The TLAC/Ombuds open forums were one venue for that discussion.

The question of academic freedom is complex and at times nebulous. Opportunities to process some of that complexity occurred twice last academic year. First, a discussion on the legal and constitutional aspects of academic freedom led by Dr. Chris Stangl, Chair of the Political Science department, occurred in November. With additional sponsorship from the Provost's Office and Faculty Senate, in the spring we brought in (virtually) Dr. Henry Reichmann, formerly AAUP's leading expert

on Academic Freedom (and most recently author of the 2021 book *Understanding Academic Freedom* [Johns Hopkins UP]*), for another edifying look at this sometimes confusing but very important concept. The main talk is available on YouTube, that link and a summary of the highlights can be found on TLAC's website. We are hoping to do another event on the topic this coming spring.

TLAC and the Ombuds Office co-sponsored another especially well-attended event, "A Discussion on Alternatives to SRIS." Over 50 faculty attended, hearing first from a panel of four faculty from four different colleges, discussing the various issues and concerns that arise when a tool for evaluation tends to disadvantage our most historically-marginalized colleagues. This conversation is happening on multiple fronts across the university. One consequence of this particular conversation will be additional information added to the TLAC website to help faculty make the best use of an inevitably inadequate tool of evaluation.

Another popular event organized because of conversations coming through the Ombuds Office involved a discussion of the pros and cons of department by-laws. Early in the spring semester, five chairs from three different colleges, Deputy Provost Jeff Osgood and local APSCUF President Margaret Ervin discussed those pros and cons. Department by-laws are not mandated by any formal university rule and run the risk of conflicting with the union's Collective Bargaining Agreement if care is not taken. On the other hand, if all faculty have bought in, it can be a fair and just, transparent and uncontroversial, way to spell out access to resources, work and makeup of committees, etc.

Survey

In April, the Ombuds Office served as a conduit for a survey developed by faculty from a variety of vistas on this campus (including the Counseling Center and Faculty Senate) hoping to gauge whether there is more that could be done to support their colleagues during these trying times. With 210 respondents and over a 20% response rate, a surprising number of faculty members admitted a lack of unawareness of many of the resources on campus. We are organizing a list of those resources to be posted on the ombuds webpage soon. We sent out an email collecting those resources specific to mental health services at the end of the semester, and will also post those to the webpage.

In partial response to feedback from the faculty needs survey, we are bringing more programming to campus. On October 7th, Dr. Leah Hollis (<https://premierespeakers.com/leah-hollis/bio>) will be coming to campus to lead workshops with specific constituencies, and to give a keynote open to all on workplace bullying. The timing of the keynote is 3:30–5:30pm in BPMC 101, with a virtual option.

The survey spawned other ideas as well. As the events take shape, you'll see that information come out from the Ombuds Office.

* Our library has made this book available as an e-book for anyone interested.

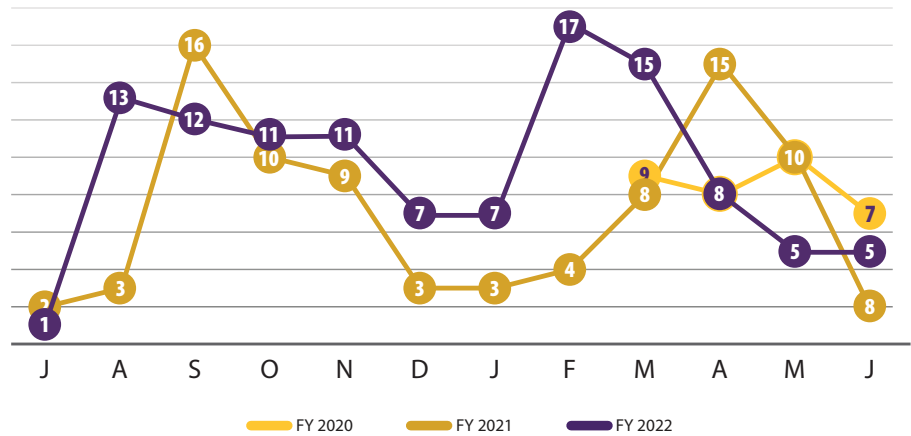
TRACKING VISITORS

This chart shows a comparison of visitors to the ombuds office by year.

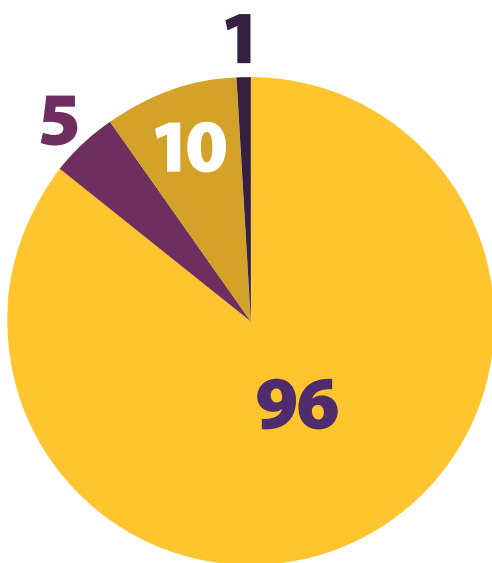
The purple line indicates traffic for the most recent year. One of the immediate takeaways is that traffic to the Ombuds Office ebbs and flows in the course of a year. In this second full year, though, the number of visits per month have evened out a bit. The beginning of fall term and the end of spring semester did not see as steep a surge as the previous year. The office is doing a steadier business throughout the year. And, we've seen an increase in the number of visitors.

For a 16 month tally from the opening of the office to the end of June 2021, there were 57 unique visitors. From July 2021 to the end of June 2022, 112 unique visitors came through the office. As was noted above, best practices for ombuds offices entails a reset of the count each month. So, a visitor who came to the office five times in the same month would be counted once. If that same visitor, came again the next month, they would be counted twice.

We appreciate the increase in visitors. That means the word is getting out. More people are aware of the Faculty Ombuds Office, and more people are seeking its services, proving the value of the university's investment in this position.



While I dedicate more space in this report to survey data than to demographics this time, know that I collect anonymized data on demographics and categories consistently and will return to a closer analysis next year on these matters.



Compared to the first 18 months of the office (11% African American, 6.1% Asian, Asian American, Pacific Islander, 3.1% Hispanic/Latinx), this past year, the total number of people of color coming through the office increased, while the percentages were 4.5%, 9%, and 1%, respectively, in the three categories noted. Seventeen percent of the visitors were male-identified, compared with 26% in the first 16 months. Adjunct faculty visited at about the same rate as in the first annual report (14%); department chairs appeared in approximately the same numbers (10 in the first annual report count, 11 in the past year), so percentage-wise, slightly down in the past year compared to the first 16 months.

- Asian American/Pacific Island/South Asian
- Black/African American
- Latinx
- Not in our other categories

Tracking Issues

The International Ombuds Association (IOA) relies on a set of “Uniform Reporting Categories”, a complete list of which can be found on the IOA website*. Since not all the categories apply to academic institutions, I have shortened the list to those most relevant. As is to be expected, the majority of the issues coming to the Ombuds Office are interpersonal in nature. Many of these kinds of issues can be addressed with carefully calibrated attention to channels of communication. Ombuds training provides a number of tools.

Misunderstandings and lack of transparency are repeated concerns. Feeling disrespected or unheard, having unresolved differences of opinion on how programs or departments are run were not uncommon conversations in the Ombuds Office. From these conversations, the data collected in the Faculty Support Needs Survey, and in the Faculty Ombuds Office Survey all suggest that there is a need for programming at this university around workplace bullying: thus the workshops planned for October 7th with Dr. Leah Hollis. (We also heard in the Faculty Support Needs Survey that many of you are thrilled to be working with the colleagues you have around you, and that needs to be noted and celebrated as well!)



A note on the “Evaluative Relationship” category: visits in this category include interpersonal issues when they occur between faculty and their superiors; as well as when faculty had challenges of various kinds with students. In terms of Covid-related visits, which had their own category in the last annual report, far fewer issues came through the Ombuds Office, and so those returned to the “Safety, Health . . .” category this time around.

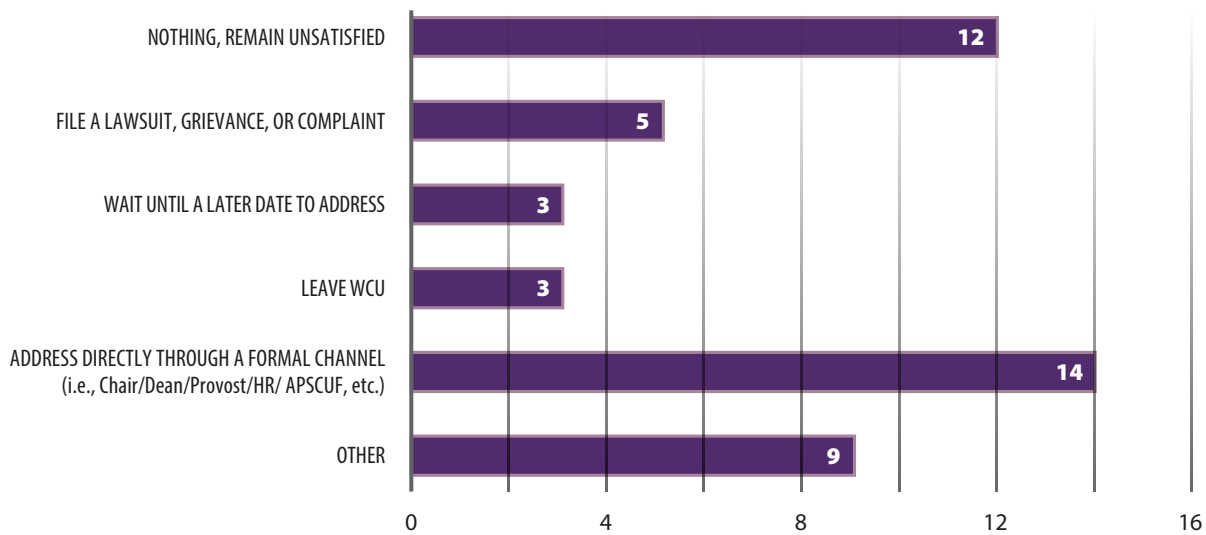
* <https://www.ombudsassociation.org/>

Faculty Ombuds Office Survey

Thirty two people responded to the Ombuds survey, and one of those people identified as not having used the office, so 54.4% of the 57 unique visitors from the first 16 months of the Ombuds Office responded to the survey. According to the survey, the most common way those respondents learned about the Office of the Faculty Ombuds was through the emails sent out from the office to all faculty or from the visits made to department meetings, Faculty Senate, and the like (56.2%). Word of mouth (12.5%), personal referral (9.38%), and the Faculty Ombuds website (9.38%), were the next most common.

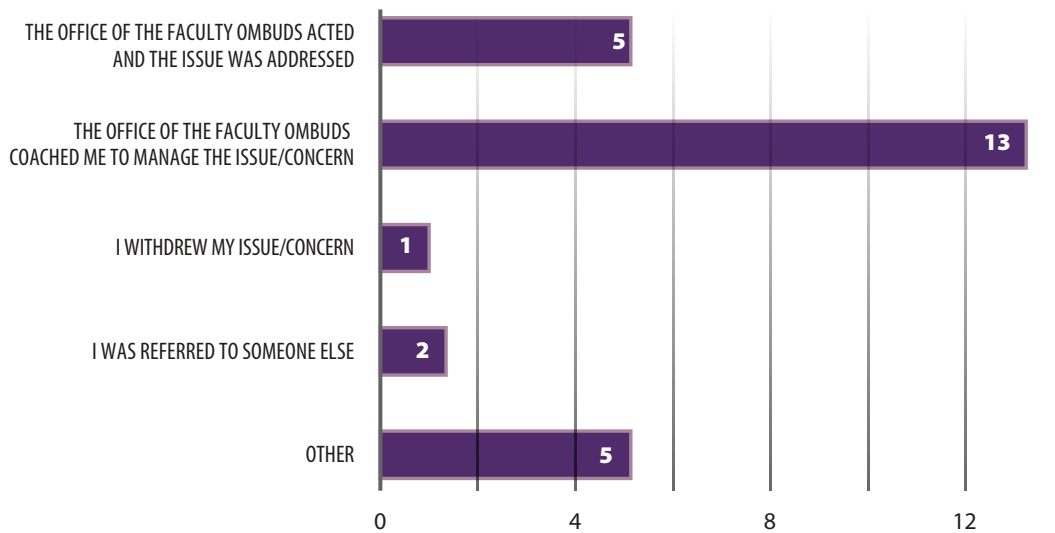
Of the 27 respondents to the question about satisfaction with the office (47.4% or 45.6% of those who used the office), nineteen (or 70.37%) were extremely satisfied, two (or 7.41%) were somewhat satisfied, and five (or 18.52%) were neither satisfied nor unsatisfied. We also have the single outlier who was extremely dissatisfied, and I conjectured above that that could have been the respondent who was unhappy that the office existed but had never used the office, or it could be a dissatisfied visitor.

For the question that read: “If you had not chosen to correspond with the Office of the Faculty Ombuds about your issue/concern, what action would you have taken?” These are the results (respondents could choose more than one answer):



The above chart is especially telling of the worth of the Ombuds Office. It tells the story of the worth of ombuds offices the world over. When someone with a concern or a problem has somewhere to go that is confidential space — a space independent of all other offices at that organization but where significant knowledge of that organization exists — a space where one is free to brainstorm and try out ideas, and think through options with nonjudgmental feedback — one has a chance to take a breath, evaluate options, possibly change course, and find a path forward. It also suggests that the Ombuds Office helps reduce traffic to otherwise already incredibly busy offices, like the Provosts and Deans, allowing them to attend to other matters of urgency.

When asked “What was the result of your communication with the Office of the Ombuds?”, these are the answers:



Of the 25 respondents to the question “What is the likelihood you would recommend the Office of the Ombuds?”, nineteen (76%) said very likely, three (12%) said likely, two were neutral and the one outlier again said “very unlikely.” So, 88% of those answering the question were likely or very likely to recommend the Ombuds Office.

The Ombuds Office very much appreciates the time people took to answer the survey questions, give thoughtful responses to the open-ended questions, and offer information that will be useful for improving the services of the Faculty Ombuds Office well into the future. I know we are all overwhelmed with survey requests, so it was especially gratifying to see the response rate to this particular survey.

NEXT STEPS

Plans for upcoming events, such as the anti-bullying workshops, have been mentioned above. Attention to the issue of academic bullying will not stop on October 8th. We will find other ways to keep that, and many other, conversations going. The collection of demographic and evaluative data will continue, as well. Programming fitting the needs of those coming through the Ombuds Office will also continue. Working with Dr. Janneken Smucker and the Teaching, Learning, and Assessment Center has been particularly fruitful. Communicating the trends and patterns heard from visitors in the Ombuds Office to the Provost's Office, Faculty Senate and APSCUF, can and have produced results, and those conversations will continue.

The website needs to be enhanced. That work will occur over the coming academic year.

I am looking forward to another enriching year, hearing your concerns, helping you identify opportunities for change, and letting the issues and concerns you bring to the office guide what future projects the Faculty Ombuds Office will help to organize.



Thanks to all who come to the office, and all who listen to the recommendations that arise from the anonymized information the Faculty Ombuds Office receives. All of you help to establish the value of this office for the university community, and to better the lives of those around you.