

The University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Office of Ombuds Services Fiscal Year 2020 Annual Report

***Submitted to the University of Tennessee, Knoxville
Chancellor on July 16, 2020***



OFFICE OF
OMBUDS SERVICES

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Executive Summary

This report was prepared following the University of Tennessee, Knoxville, Office of Ombuds Services Charter, in order to provide a report every fiscal year to the University of Tennessee, Knoxville Chancellor. This report is also provided to the Faculty Senate, following university policies listed in the Faculty Handbook. Additionally, the report meets the reporting guidelines of the International Ombudsman Association (IOA) and is made available to the public at ombuds.utk.edu.



The Office of Ombuds Services was established on May 1, 2019 to serve both the Knoxville campus and the University of Tennessee Institute of Agriculture (UTIA). Office activities for Fiscal Year 2020 have focused on marketing and outreach, continued ombuds and professional leadership development for the university ombudsperson, engaging in synergistic cross-campus activities, designing a caseload database, developing visualization techniques to demystify ombuds activities, and design and develop a program evaluation plan. The Office served a total of 257 visitors involving 154 cases. Visitors included 4 undergraduate students, 47 graduate students, 109 faculty, 56 staff, 35 department heads and up, and 6 external visitors.

For the analysis of visitor conversational narratives, each visitor concern was coded following the IOA Uniform Reporting Categories (Dale, Ganci, Miller, & Sebok, 2008). Additionally, there were themes and codes that emerged from the data related to services provided to visitors and visitor session activities that became part of the data analysis. The most prominent theme in the visitor data with high number of reference was related to the IOA category Evaluative Relationships with a total of 168 visitors who referred to having concerns that fell in that category. Tensions observed in these relationships were between graduate students and advisors/supervisors, faculty and department heads, and staff and supervisors. There were also themes related to the COVID-19 global pandemic that were raised as concerns by visitors that have been included in this report.

Recommendations for Fiscal Year 2021:

- Invest in professional development for university leaders to gain skills to facilitate difficult conversations. Potential training options include Crucial Conversation Skills (Patterson, Grenny, McMillan, & Switzler, 2011) and Nonviolent Communication (Rosenberg & Chopra, 2015).
- Direct the Office of Ombuds Services to reach out to the Graduate School, Human Resources, the Office of Equity and Diversity, and the Office of Title IX in order to develop a joint workshop on difficult conversations for faculty, staff, and graduate students.
- Develop a mechanism to ensure that, at all levels, new practices, policies, and procedures related to COVID-19 are being implemented in a fashion that is true to the administration's original intent and inclusive spirit.

Office of Ombuds Services Overview

The UT Knoxville Office of Ombuds Services was established on May 1, 2019 to serve as a confidential resource for the Knoxville campus and the University of Tennessee Institute of Agriculture (UTIA). The Office serves all employees, both faculty and staff, as well as graduate students. The Office is staffed by an ombudsperson who practices in accordance to the International Ombudsman Association (IOA) professional standards and who will work with visitors as a trusted consultant.

Mission Statement

The mission for the Office of Ombuds Services is to serve as a no-barrier, first stop when seeking information and insight from a trusted consultant who is independent, impartial, confidential, and informal. The ombudsperson will help visitors make empowered decisions related to organizational disputes, conflicts, and barriers that stand in the way of the visitor reaching their full potential. Visitors, as well as stakeholders when appropriate, will engage in constructive problem-solving with the ombudsperson that instills respect and civility. The ombudsperson will help visitors identify, examine, and reflect on their experiences relative to university policies and procedures, including, as requested, generating options for navigating the specific situation. When appropriate, the ombudsperson will provide training, educational activities, and coaching to individuals and organizational units that are facing challenges. The ombudsperson also serves as a catalyst for constructive organizational change by identifying and reporting emerging trends and issues and providing upward feedback to university officials.



Standards of Practice

The Office of Ombuds Services operates consistent with the IOA Code of Ethics and Standards of Practice. The IOA is dedicated to excellence in the practice of ombuds work and their code of ethics provides a common set of professional ethical principles to which members adhere. The IOA Code of Ethics reflects a commitment to promoting ethical conduct in the performance of the ombudsperson role and to maintaining the integrity of the ombuds profession. An ombudsperson shall be truthful and act with integrity, shall foster respect for all members of the organization they serve, and shall promote procedural fairness in the content and administration of the organizations' practices, processes, and policies.

Professional Affiliation

Dr. Lisa Yamagata-Lynch, the University Ombudsperson, is a member of the IOA.

Supervisory Transition

With the retirement of Interim Chancellor Wayne Davis, the ombudsperson began reporting operational matters related to the Office to Chancellor Donde Plowman following the IOA Code of Ethics and Standards of Practice. However, upon the first couple months of this arrangement, it became clear that it would be best that Chief of Staff Matthew Scoggins take this role because he can be accessible at a moment's notice when necessary. This arrangement was made so that the ombudsperson has a person to contact within the Chancellor's Office with the understanding that the ombudsperson still has direct access to the Chancellor.

Fiscal Year 2020 Activities

Fiscal Year 2020 (FY2020) was the first full year of Office of Ombuds Services operations. In that time, Office activities have included the following:

- Staffing
- Maintaining a Physical Space for the Office
- Maintaining an Online Presence
- Engaging in Ombudsperson Professional Development
- Engaging in IOA CO-OP Certification Process
- Engaging in Internal Outreach
- Development of Caseload Database
- Program Evaluation Planning and Implementation
- Campus-Wide Synergistic Activities



Staffing

Starting May 1, 2019, Dr. Lisa Yamagata-Lynch was internally hired to serve as the full-time University Ombudsperson. There was no change in staffing during FY2020.

Maintaining Physical Space for the Office

The Office of Ombuds Services is located in Dunford Hall 2423. All renovations to the office were completed. Dunford 2423 provides a meeting space to accommodate up to 3 visitors comfortably. During the COVID-19 pandemic, when faculty, staff, and graduate students were largely prevented from being on campus, ombuds services transitioned primarily to Zoom and phone meetings.

Maintaining an Online Presence

The Office of Ombuds Services website was launched in August 2019 at ombuds.utk.edu. It provides the following information:

- About—includes office charter and access to annual report
- Ethics and Standards of Practice
- Outreach and Professional Development
- Program Evaluation of Our Services
- Ombudsperson FAQ

Engaging in Ombudsperson Professional Development

The ombudsperson has been part of several IOA training in both face-to-face and webinar formats. These activities included:

- IOA 2019 Foundations Course
- IOA 2019 Specialty Course
- IOA Webinar Cultural Components in Conflict
- IOA Webinar Establishing Trust in Groups
- IOA Webinar in the Room Where it Happens

Within various training offered at UT, the ombudsperson took part in the following:

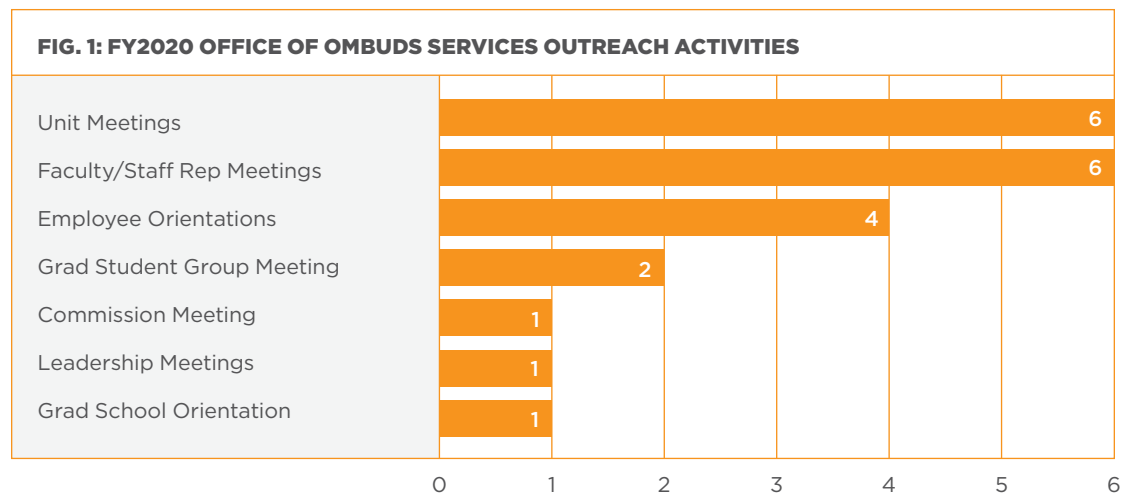
- Communicating Through Challenging Customer Interactions
- Military Cultural Competency “Green Zone” Training
- Safe Zone 1
- Safe Zone 2
- Completed required compliance training for all employees

Community Mediation Center Training

- TN Rule 31 General Civil Mediator Training

Engaging in IOA CO-OP Certification Process

The ombudsperson has been taking steps to become a certified ombuds through the IOA. In August 2019, she passed the examination required as the first step to becoming a Certified Organizational Ombudsman Practitioner.® In May 2020, she completed the required one-year full-time service as an ombudsperson. In June 2020, the ombudsperson sent her certification application materials to the IOA for certification review committee. She is currently awaiting notification of her certification status.



Engaging in Internal Outreach

For the Office of Ombuds Services to best serve faculty, staff, and graduate students, the ombudsperson must build relationships with existing campus units and communicate to potential visitors how the office provides services to them while maintaining independence, neutrality and impartiality, confidentiality, and informality. During FY2020, the ombudsperson engaged in a total of 21 outreach events specifically to introduce the Office of Ombuds Services to faculty, staff, and graduate students. These events included unit/department meetings, faculty/staff representative meetings, employee orientations, graduate student group meetings, commission meetings, leadership meetings, and Graduate School Orientation. In February 2020, the ombudsperson reported the 2019 calendar year Office activities as well as visitor case thematic findings to the Faculty Senate. **Figure 1** shows the frequency of outreach engagements in FY2020.

Development of Visitor and Caseload Database

Following the IOA Code of Ethics and Standards of Practice, the ombudsperson designed and developed a visitor and caseload database with Microsoft Excel and QSR Nvivo, a qualitative research tool. The Excel database provides a method to communicate visitor traffic information to the UT community, and the Nvivo database provides the ability to engage in analysis of visitor cases and overarching themes.



Program Evaluation Planning

The Office engaged in several program evaluation planning activities. The first involved developing the Evaluation Logic Model with help from Dr. Pam Bishop Director of the National Institute for STEM Evaluation and Research (NISER), who is leading the eVOLve (Evaluation Office for Learning and Visioning Excellence) initiative.

With the continued assistance from eVOLve we created the Evaluation Framework. The Evaluation Framework will become a guide for future development of evaluation instruments for each specific stakeholder and evaluation question. Both the program Evaluation Logic Model and the Evaluation Framework can be found at the **Program Evaluation of Our Services** section of the Office website.

An Annual Campus Visitor Survey and Partner Survey were developed in FY2020. The Campus Visitor Survey was initially scheduled for implementation in April 2020, but was postponed to FY2021 due to the COVID-19 global pandemic. The Partner Survey was implemented in May 2020, and we obtained evaluation data from stakeholders.

The Partner Survey yielded 10 responses out of close to 30 individuals who received the survey. From those who responded, we learned that several partners see value in the Office of Ombuds Services because it provides faculty, staff, and graduate students access to a full-time confidential resource from which they may obtain counsel and guidance on potentially difficult situations. Partners also appreciated that faculty, staff, and graduate students can work with the ombudsperson to find a path to a solution when they find themselves in the middle of a difficult and complex organizational problem. Several partners also shared that, as a result of the ombudsperson's internal outreach efforts in FY2020, the Office of Ombuds Services now has a visible presence on campus. One respondent shared that in the future it may be beneficial for the Office of Ombuds Services, Office of Equity and Diversity, and Office of Title IX to develop and facilitate a joint training session on navigating difficult situations for faculty, staff, and graduate students.

Campus-Wide Synergistic Activities

As an active member of the UT community, the ombudsperson engaged in synergistic campus activities in FY2020. These activities included:

- Continued to serve on Strategies and Tactics for Recruiting to Improve Diversity and Excellence (STRIDE)
- Served as an Ex-Officio member of the Commission for Women
- Served on the Reimagining Fall Task Force, Workplace Safety subcommittee

- Served as UT TNVoice Task Force Chair, completed report and submitted to the Provost and Faculty Senate
- Served on the UTK Bullying Task Force as Co-Chair with Associate Vice Chancellor Mary Lucal
- Served on the UTK Post Doc Working Group
- Served on the IDI Advisory Campus Implementation Advisory Board
- Served on the UTK Action Collaborative
- Attended the National Academy of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine Action Collaborative 2019 Summit

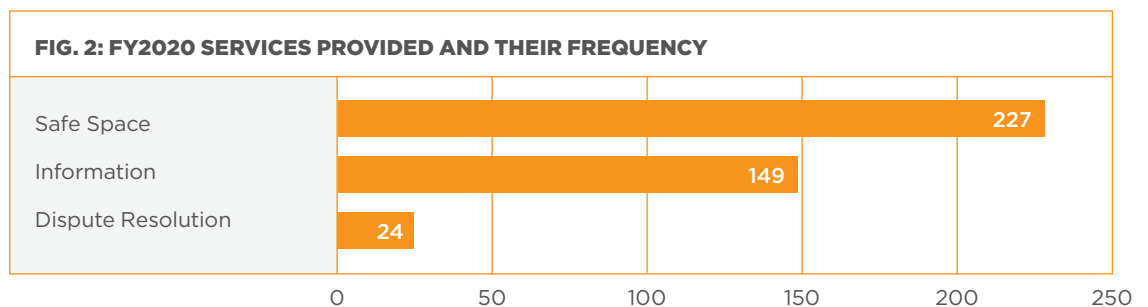
Visitors Served and Emerging Case Themes

Services Provided

In FY2020, services that the ombudsperson provided to faculty, staff, and graduate students included:

- A safe space for visitors to share their concerns by listening and providing consultations
- Clarification of information related to policies
- Dispute resolution

Figure 2 shows the frequency of each services provided among total visitors. The total number of services provided is greater than the total number of visitors because many visitors came to the Office seeking multiple services.



Overwhelmingly, most visitors came to the Office looking for a safe and neutral location to talk to a confidential resource because they wanted their concerns to be heard. These listening sessions took place on the phone, via Zoom, or in person and involved one-on-one meetings as well as meetings with groups of visitors. While being heard, many visitors had the chance to hear their own voice and actively engage in problem solving in order to make decisions about their situation. In some cases, the session was all that visitors needed to come to their own decision-making about their situation.

The ombudsperson also acted as a consultant who assisted visitors in gaining information about UT/UTIA policies, procedures, and existing resources. Assisting visitors in this way can help them better navigate the organization and make informed and empowered decisions while weighing options on how to approach their situation. In these cases, the ombudsperson helped visitors interpret existing policies, procedures, and how policies and procedures would apply to visitor situations. After these sessions, there were some visitors who chose to report their situation to the Office of Equity and Diversity as well as to the Office of Title IX.

When there was not a clear way to apply existing policies, procedures, and resources to a visitor’s situation, the ombudsperson helped the visitor identify a list of questions to ask the appropriate formal office(s) to obtain further information. When visitors were uncomfortable asking questions to representatives from official offices, the visitor provided the ombudsperson with permission to visit offices such as HR, Provost’s Office, Graduate School, and Title IX to find out more information about their policies, procedures, resources, and how they would apply to the visitor situation.

Finally, though it was a comparatively small number, there were visitors who came to the office seeking dispute resolution and mediation. Some of these cases led to the ombudsperson engaging in shuttle diplomacy—meeting with each party separately and helping them communicate to one another through the ombudsperson. In other cases, the ombudsperson hosted joint mediation meetings at her office.

Visitor Session Activities While Meeting the Ombudsperson

When visitors met with the ombudsperson, they engaged in different types of situation analysis and problem-solving activities, while they decide the best course of action to take. **Figure 3** shows a graphic representation of the different types of meeting session activities that visitors engaged with the ombudsperson.

FIG. 3: POTENTIAL VISITOR SITUATION ANALYSES AND PROBLEM-SOLVING ACTIVITIES



Not all visitors engaged in every activity represented on the figure. **Table 1** shows how often visitors engaged in situation analysis and problem-solving, and how often they engaged in each sub-activity. When looking at the data, most visitors engaged in some form of problem-solving related to their situation. Within problem-solving, visitors most frequently engaged in problem-framing.

TABLE 1: FY2020 VISITOR SESSION ACTIVITIES	
SESSION ACTIVITIES	FREQUENCY
Situation Analysis	129
Explore Paths	78
Academic	33
Career	38
Situation Assessment	108
Cost Benefit Analysis	82
Identify Wants/Needs	83
Problem Solving	221
Idea Generation	130
Brainstorm Ideas	121
Test Ideas	14
Problem Framing	201
Articulate	190
Explore	142
Problem Tackling	128
Analyze	123
Design Solutions	78
Evaluate	5

Visitor Traffic

Visitors met with the ombudsperson steadily throughout the fiscal year once the website was launched and the ombudsperson started outreach activities in August 2019. In the month prior to this outreach, the office had 8 visitors. After these initiatives, monthly visitor traffic ranged from 17 to 35 visitors. The number of total visitors for this fiscal year was 257 involving 157 unique cases. **Figure 4** shows monthly office visitor traffic including total cases, total new cases, and ongoing cases.

There is much debate on how to accurately count visitors among ombuds professionals while maintaining confidentiality. In this report the following rules were applied to count visitors:

- **Visitors:** individuals who visit the Office in any given month. Each visitor is counted once every month no matter how frequently they came back to the office within that month. When an individual visits more than one month, they are counted as a visitor in the following month (e.g. if a staff member visited the Office in May, the staff member was counted as a visitor in May, and if they visited in June, they were counted as a visitor in June as well);
- **New cases:** Cases introduced to the Office for the first time whether it involves one visitor or multiple visitors (e.g. if there were three faculty who came to visit together or separately about one case, the case was counted as one case, but visitors were counted as three); and
- **Ongoing cases:** Cases that required a visitor to consult the ombudsperson through multiple months.



FIG. 4: FY2020 OFFICE OF OMBUDS SERVICES VISITOR TRAFFIC

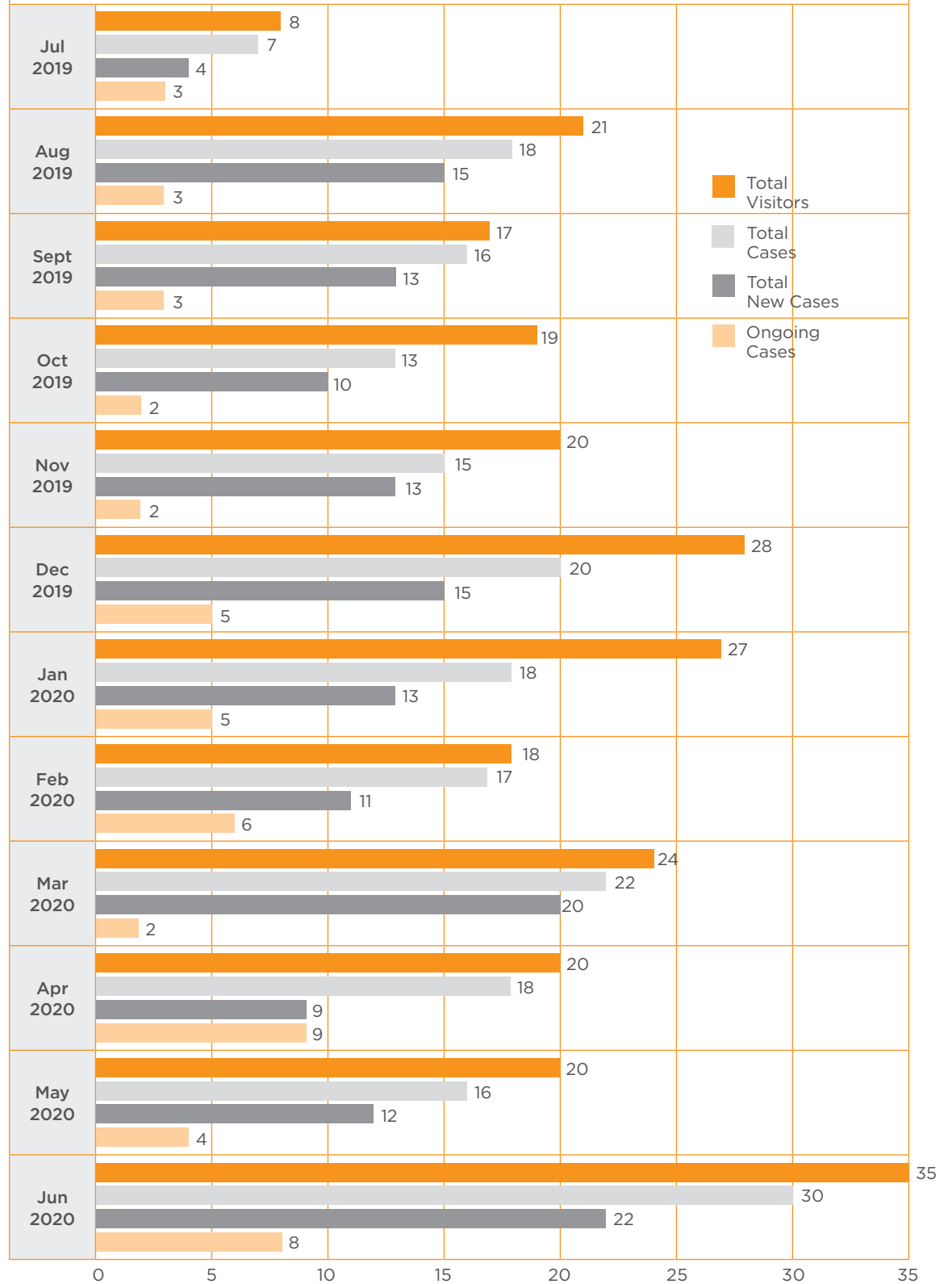
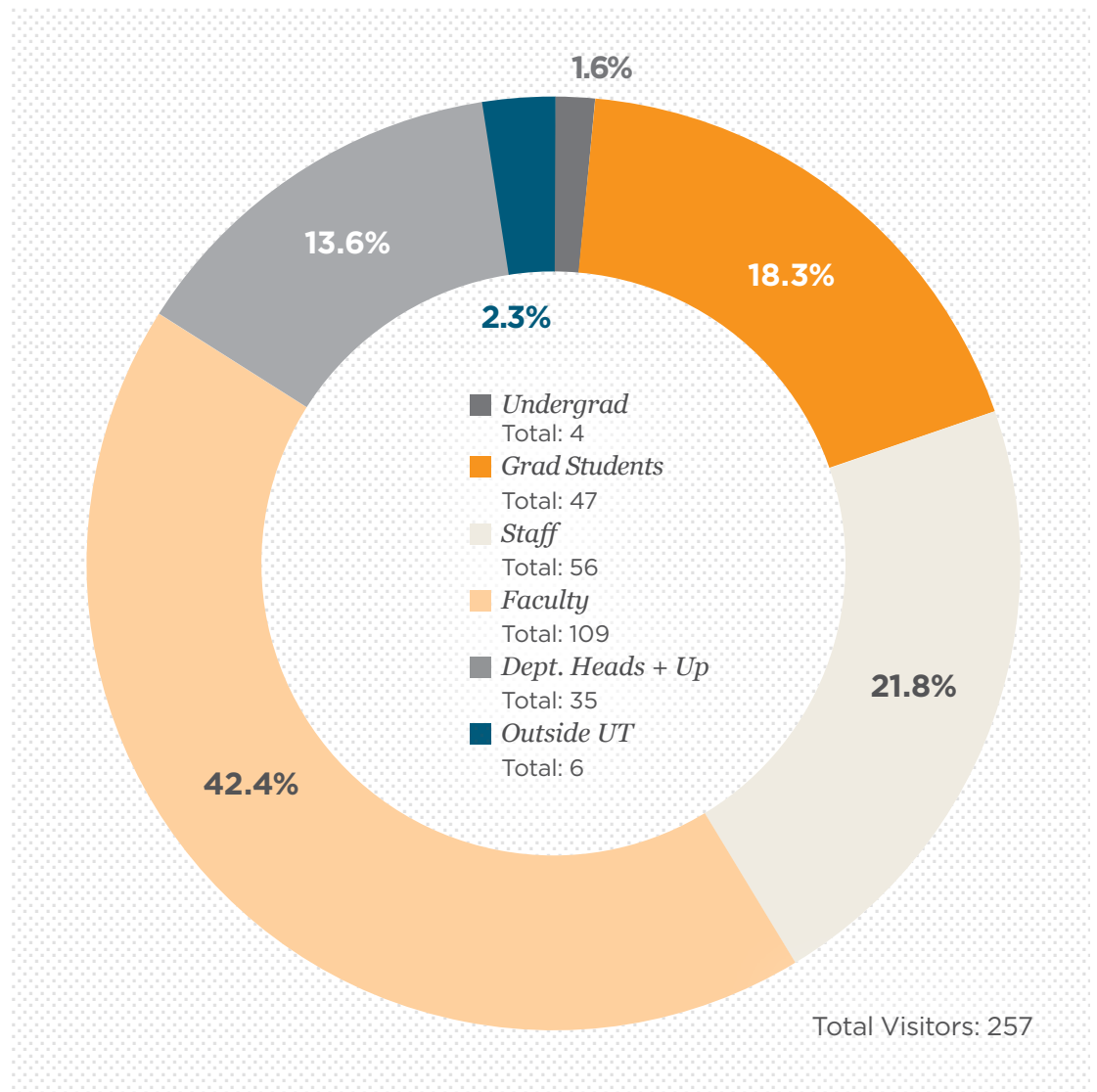


Figure 5 shows how many visitors came to the Office of Ombuds Services from each visitor group. Faculty was the largest group to visit the Office, but some visitors came on behalf of their graduate students. These included situations where faculty strongly felt that their student needed to visit the ombudsperson but were not sure that the student would do so on their own. Therefore, the faculty visited with the ombudsperson instead to discuss how to best support their student.

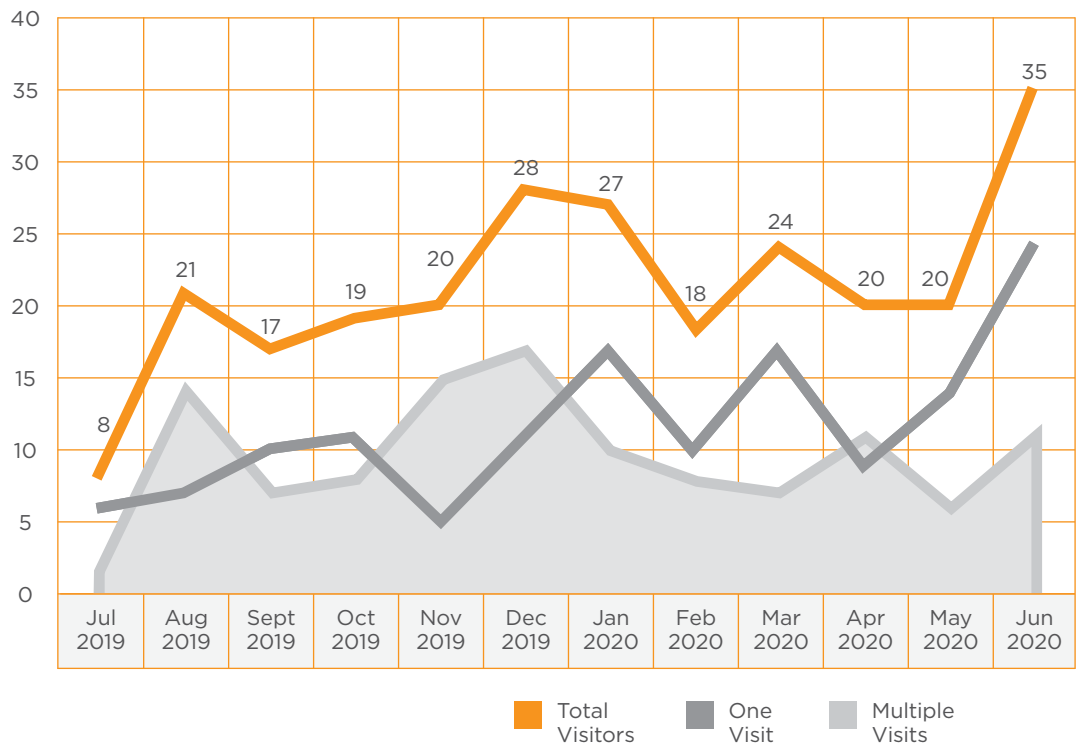
FIG. 5: FY2020 TOTAL VISITORS BY ROLE



Visitor Intensity

Depending on the complexity of issues in visitor cases, there were visitors who came to the office once, and there were others who visited multiple times in the same month. **Figure 6** shows the frequency of One Visit visitors and Multiple Visit visitors in comparison to Total Visitors for each month.

FIG. 6: FY2020 VISITOR TRAFFIC INTENSITY



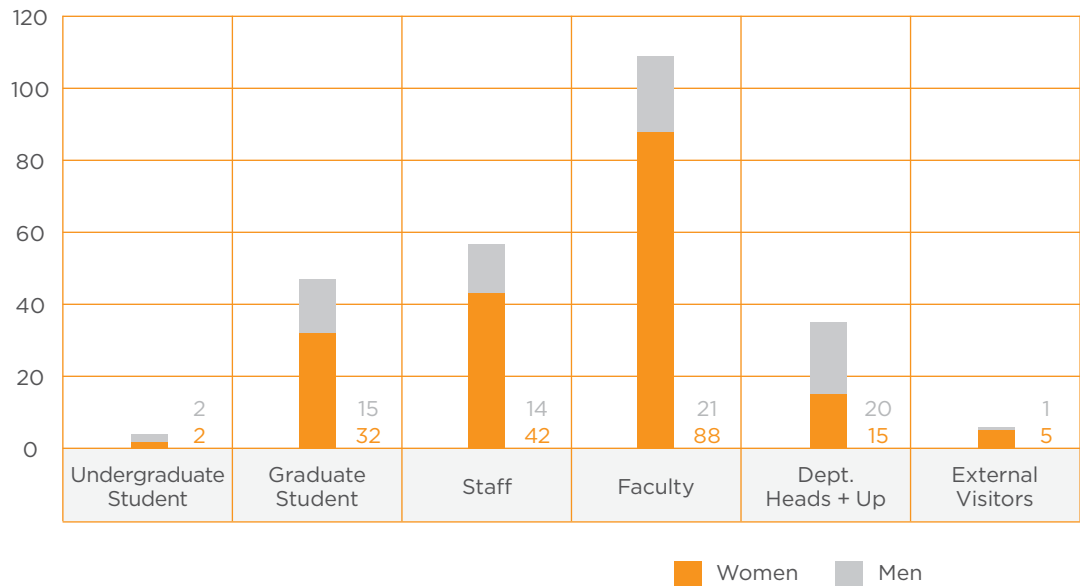
Overwhelmingly, most visitors came to the Office looking for a safe and neutral location to talk to a confidential resource because they wanted their concerns to be heard.

Visitor Demographics

Gender

Figure 7 shows the gender distribution of visitors based on their role at the university. In the faculty, staff, and graduate student group there were considerably more visitors who were women than men. Among this group, there were a total of 162 visitors who were women and 50 visitors who were men. Among the Department Heads and up 15 visitors were women and 20 visitors were men. While the Office of Ombuds Services does not directly work with undergraduate students or visitors outside of the university, there were some visitors from this group that the ombudsperson worked with, and among that group there were more visitors who were women than men.

FIG. 7: FY2020 VISITOR DISTRIBUTION

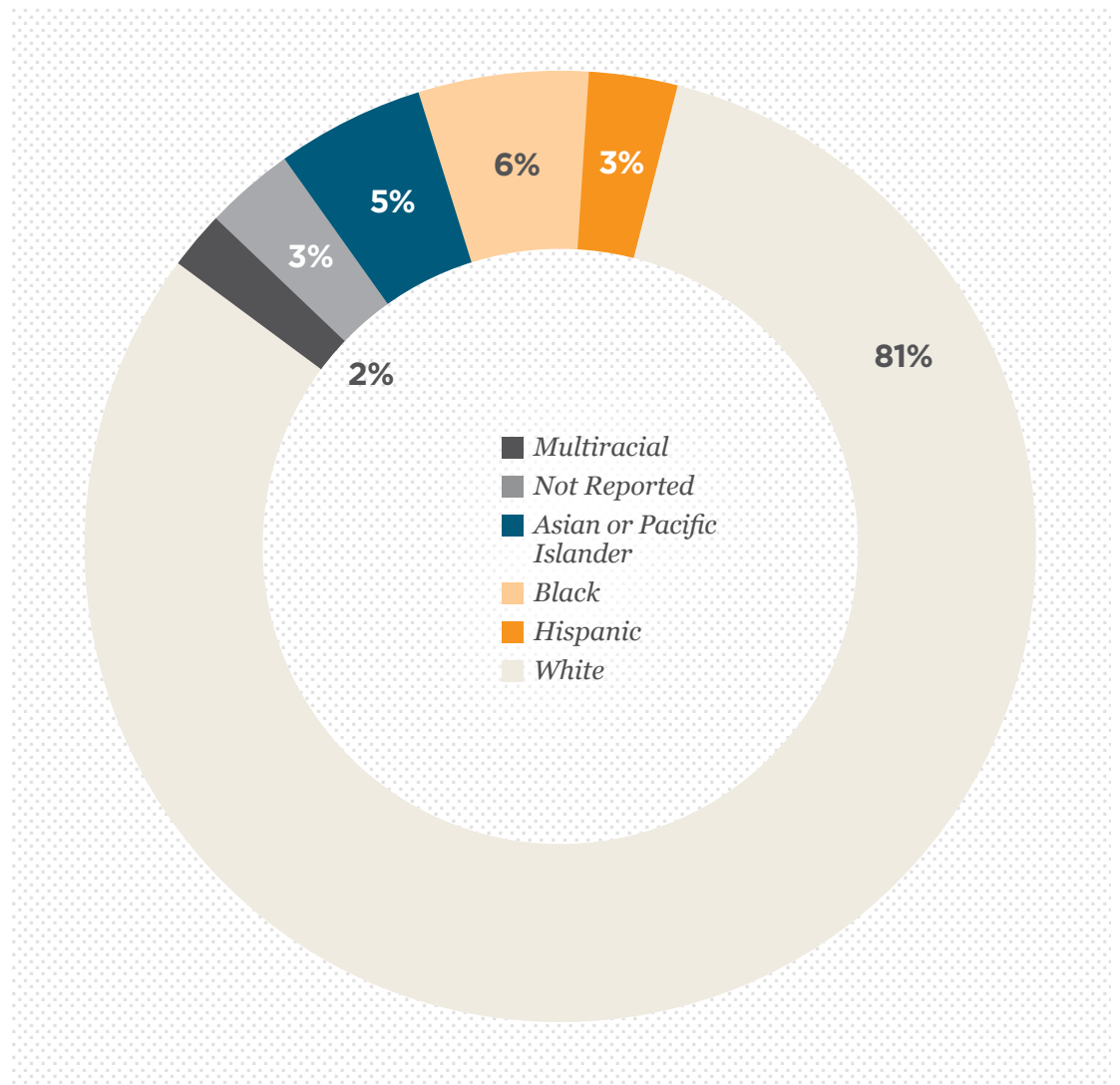


When looking at the data, most visitors engaged in some form of problem-solving related to their situation.

Race

Figure 8 shows the FY2020 visitor race information based on EEO Category and race data available in IRIS. For visitors whom this information was not available, they were marked “not reported” and excluded from the graph. Visitor race distribution data follows the trends reflected in the UT Fact Book.

FIG. 8: FY2020 VISITOR RACE EEO CATEGORY AND RACE DATA

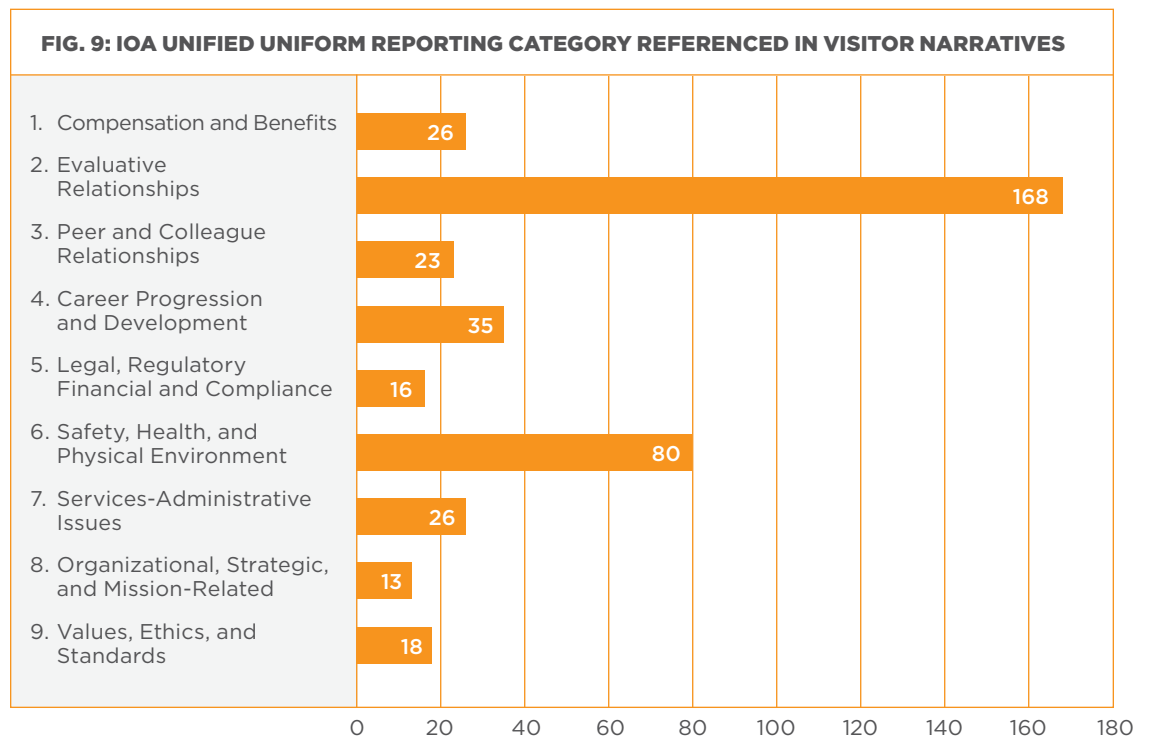


Themes in Visitor Conversational Narratives

While engaging in thematic analysis of visitor conversations, the ombudsperson treated each visitor as a unique narrative data point, and treated narratives as a form of public engagement of interpretations and negotiations of public meanings (Bruner, 1990). While the details of each visitor narrative were not recorded, the ombudsperson coded conversational narratives soon after meeting with visitors based on memory and a one sentence description of what the visitor shared. The ombudsperson approached shared narratives as a social interaction that generated ideas for ways in which the visitor could engage in an ongoing dialogue about the shared reality. (Bruner, 2002). Emerging themes from visitor narratives were coded following the IOA Uniform Reporting Categories (Dale, Ganci, Miller, & Sebok, 2008). Additionally, there were other themes that emerged from the visitor narratives. The main categories included in the IOA Uniform Reporting Categories include:

1. Compensation and Benefits
2. Evaluative Relationships
3. Peer and Colleague Relationships
4. Career Progression and Development
5. Legal, Regulatory, Financial and Compliance
6. Safety, Health, and Physical Environment
7. Services/Administrative Issues
8. Organizational, Strategic, and Mission Related
9. Values, Ethics, and Standards

Figure 9 shows the frequency in which each IOA Uniform Reporting Category was referenced in conversational narratives shared by 257 visitors in FY2020.



Evaluative Relationships was the category most frequently referenced in visitor conversational narratives with 168 references. Tensions observed in these relationships were between graduate students and advisors/supervisors, faculty and department heads, and staff and supervisors. Within this category the top three subcategories referenced were Communication with 101 occurrences, Respect-Treatment with 100 occurrences, and Trust-Integrity with 89 occurrences. Another main level IOA reporting category that had a high number of reference was Safety, Health, and Physical Health. The top two subcategories within this main category were Work-Related Stress and Work-Life Balance with 54 occurrences and Safety with 45 occurrences. Most of the safety concerns that visitors referred to were related to psychological safety (Edmondson 1999; 2019). Psychological safety is a shared understanding among work teams that each member is able to engage in interpersonal risk-taking by expressing and being themselves while collaboratively working to attain a shared goal. In many cases, faculty, staff, and graduate students felt that they lost their sense of psychological safety through interactions with supervisors, and sometimes with peers.

Themes Related to the COVID-19 Pandemic

Out of the 257 visitors, there were 20 visitors who came to see the ombudsperson specifically related to COVID-19. COVID-19 will continue to be a concern in FY2021 in terms of how the campus community adjusts academic engagement and work activities. Therefore, common themes that emerged from visitor conversational narratives related to COVID-19 will be presented below.



Among staff and graduate student visitors, there was a concern regarding communication of work expectations as well as how remote work will be operationalized at their individual unit. While visitors appreciated the clear communication and messaging from upper administration including that from the Chancellor, the Provost, and Human Resources, they had questions regarding how their immediate supervisors were interpreting campus-wide messaging. There were instances when staff were concerned that, in their unit, localized practices of new policies and procedures were not as inclusive as what was intended by the original messaging. There were times that it was unclear to staff members whether the way in which their supervisors implemented new policies and procedures were in alignment with what they thought was being communicated by the upper administration. However, staff members did not feel comfortable questioning their supervisors, especially at a difficult time while everyone was adjusting to a new normal. Graduate student visitors, especially in STEM fields in lab settings, had similar concerns. They were unsure whether their department was following the overall messaging from upper administration regarding when to keep their labs open or closed, and how they were to adjust their work to meet grant funding expectations.

When campus initially went to remote work and learning in March, faculty visitors were interested in how their students could gain access to support services such as the UT Health Center and the Counseling Center. These concerns were resolved as our campus quickly transitioned to the new way of providing services to students. Faculty were also concerned about what remote teaching would look like, and the workload associated with converting their in-person classes to virtual

classes mid-semester. Once the spring semester ended, faculty who chose to deliver their fall courses online were concerned about the summer workload associated with converting their courses. Finally, before the adjusted fall course schedule was put in place, faculty were concerned about whether the instructional modality choices they communicated to their department and college would be honored, and whether they would be asked to teach in a different format.

Ombudsperson Reflections

As it was observed in the FY2019 report, it is unsurprising that the most frequent concern identified by visitors was in the area of evaluative relationships. Upon analysis and reflection, it can be said that many of these concerns may have not escalated to the point that they did in FY2020 if advisors, managers, directors, department heads, and any other employee with a supervisory role had background experience and preparedness in engaging in difficult conversations. For most people, when there is a conflict or a difficult situation, their instinct is to avoid it. However, we need leaders who will look at these potentially uncomfortable conflicts that warrant difficult conversations as opportunities to engage in organizational learning, which can then prevent future conflict (Cloe, 2011). In order to take advantage of uncomfortable conflict situations as potential learning opportunities we need leaders to become comfortable with them and skilled at facilitating necessary conversations.

Recommendations

- Invest in professional development for university leaders to gain skills to facilitate difficult conversations. Potential training options include Crucial Conversation Skills (Patterson, Grenny, McMillan, & Switzler, 2011) and Nonviolent Communication (Rosenberg & Chopra, 2015).
- Direct the Office of Ombuds Services to reach out to the Graduate School, Human Resources, the Office of Equity and Diversity, and the Office of Title IX in order to develop a joint workshop on difficult conversations for faculty, staff, and graduate students.
- Develop a mechanism to ensure that, at all levels, new practices, policies, and procedures related to COVID-19 are being implemented in a fashion that is true to the administration's original intent and inclusive spirit.



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