

The University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Office of Ombuds Services Fiscal Year 2021 Annual Report

*Submitted to the University of Tennessee, Knoxville
Chancellor in August 2021*



Lisa Yamagata-Lynch
Ombudsperson and Director

2423 Dunford Hall
915 Volunteer Blvd.
Knoxville, TN 37996

About the Office of Ombuds Service

The Office of Ombuds Services was established on May 1, 2019, to serve as a confidential resource for the university community that consists of the University of Tennessee (UT), Knoxville including 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 works 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 for those 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 barriers, conflicts, and disputes that stand in the way of their ability to reach their full potential.

Standards of Practice

The Office of Ombuds Services operates consistent with the IOA Code of Ethics and Standards of Practice.

Office Staff Professional Affiliation

Dr. Lisa Yamagata-Lynch, the University Ombudsperson and Director, is a member of IOA, Tennessee Association of Professional Mediators (TAPM), and Association for Talent Development (ATD).

How this Report was Prepared

The IOA Code of Ethics and Standards of Practice guided the ethical and practical commitments to confidentiality while preparing this report. To adhere to these codes and standards, information that could identify visitors was stripped during data collection. The findings introduced in this report are a synthesis of visitor traffic trends and visitor experiences based on ombudsperson interpretations of observed particularities (Stake, 1995). This report does not provide specific information regarding individual visitor situations. Instead, when presenting findings about visitor experiences, composite narratives of graduate student, staff, and faculty experiences are presented based on prevalent themes. Additionally, this report does not provide generalizable claims about the entire population that the Office serves.

The ombudsperson identified quantitative metrics and qualitative themes to examine data using Stake's (2010) knowledge framework that refers to both statistical and professional knowledge. Excel, Nvivo 12, and EdrawMax were used as digital tools for data collection and analyses. Quantitative analyses of visitor traffic trends included monthly aggregate of traffic data and other demographic data. For the qualitative analyses of visitor experiences, the ombudsperson examined conversational narratives as well as the literature to engage in sense-making of observed themes. While coding conversational visitor narratives, the ombudsperson followed the constant comparative methodology (Charmaz, 2014; Corbin & Strauss, 2014), and used the IOA Uniform Reporting Categories (Dale, Ganci, Miller, & Sebok, 2008) to uncover themes from visitor experiences.

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Executive Summary

The purpose of this annual report is to provide the university community information regarding FY2021 Office of Ombuds Services operations and visitor experiences. This report was prepared following the specifications in the Office Charter and Faculty Handbook. This report meets the reporting guidelines of the International Ombudsman Association (IOA). Office operations highlights include: (a) COVID accommodations, (b) meeting Certified Organizational Ombudsman Practitioner® (CO-OP) requirements, and (c) services that address FY2020 recommendations.



Both quantitative and qualitative data were collected and analyzed, while maintaining confidentiality, to make sense of visitor experiences. The analyses of visitor traffic showed that the Office served 401 visitors involving 197 cases. These visitors included 56 graduate students, 80 staff, 64 non-tenure track faculty, 111 tenure track faculty, 68 department/unit supervisors, 12 undergraduate students, and 10 visitors external to the university. This showed an increase of 144 visitors compared to the previous year. Three themes emerged from visitor conversational narratives about their experiences: (1) staff and faculty visitors' concerns about job security, (2) graduate student visitors' concerns about evaluative relationships, and (3) undergraduate student visitors' challenges with inter-office coordination. Additionally, visitor concerns were predominantly about evaluative relationships and safety, health, and physical environment in the IOA Uniform Reporting Categories (Dale, Ganci, Miller, & Sebok, 2008). Most of these safety concerns were related to job-related stress.

Synthesis of the literature and thematic findings uncovered that when employee and graduate student visitors experienced communication challenges with their supervisors, their dignity was often violated (Hicks, 2011; 2018). These violations led to disruptions in psychological safety (Edmondson 1999; 2019). Additionally, visitors' positionality as an individual and professional within the organizational structure of the university (Anthias, 2008), was an impediment to initiating the crucial conversations (Patterson, Grenny, McMillan, & Switzler, 2011) with their supervisors that would allow them to heal from injuries to their dignity. The analysis of visitor experiences and the literature indicated that when supervisors become dignity-conscious

leaders it is likely that employees and students find opportunities to maintain healthy evaluative relationships through dialogue.

Based on FY2021 findings the recommendations to the university community include:

1. Expand organizational capacity for offering education on crucial conversations to graduate students, staff, and faculty.
2. Engage university leaders in education programs about dignity-conscious leaders who do no harm to others or themselves by honoring dignity.
3. Design and develop a comprehensive on-the-job professional development program for employees and graduate students in order to shift the organizational culture surrounding evaluative relationships and cultivate a shared ownership of belonging in the university community by addressing crucial conversations, psychological safety, dignity consciousness, and individual as well as professional positionality.

Annual Report Overview

Goals

The goals for preparing this report included:

- Meet expectations set by the International Ombudsman Association (IOA) Standards of Practice as well as the university to provide an annual report to the Chancellor and other organizational community members regarding office operations and visitor experiences;
- Demonstrate to visitors, potential visitors, and stakeholders how the Office of Ombuds Services serves the university community; and
- Provide insights to the university community for continual organizational development.

While addressing the above goals, this report includes information regarding Office operations, visitor experiences, and recommendations. Visitor experiences shared in this report do not refer to individual experiences, but instead provide a composite narrative about themes that appeared in multiple visitor experiences.

Recommendations from the Previous Year

Based on FY2020 findings, the recommendations to the university community include:

1. Invest in leadership 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).
2. Develop a partnership between the Office of Ombuds Services and the Graduate School, the Office of Human Resources, and the Office of Equity and Diversity wherein an in-house workshop about difficult conversations for faculty, staff, and graduate students is created.
3. Develop a mechanism to ensure new workplace and academic program practices related to policies and procedures that have been modified due to COVID-19 are being implemented true to their original inclusive spirit.

This report includes discussions of how the Office contributed to recommendations 1 and 2.

Operational Activities

Staffing

During FY2021, Lisa Yamagata-Lynch was the sole full-time University Ombudsperson. In May 2021, she was promoted to Director of the Office of Ombuds Services and a national search for an Associate Ombudsperson began. At the writing of this report, the search was underway.

COVID Accommodations

During FY2021, most visitor meetings occurred while university operations were under COVID precautions. Many meetings with visitors took place virtually through Zoom or on the phone. The ombudsperson began in-person meetings on campus on June 1. Moving forward, visitors will have the choice to request an in-person or a virtual meeting. Additionally, in compliance with COVID precautions, the ombudsperson did not travel, and funds to support travel were diverted to ombudsperson professional development to address recommendations from FY2020.

Maintaining and Expanding Physical Office Space

The Office is currently located in Dunford Hall 2423. In preparation for the arrival of the Associate Ombudsperson, Dunford Hall 2432 was secured as a second office. Dunford 2432 will be designed to replicate 2423 and accommodate up to 3 visitors in meetings. Renovations for 2432 are in progress.

Ombudsperson Professional Development

The ombudsperson engaged in several professional development activities. These included:

COMPLIANCE TRAINING

- Completed training required to serve all university employees

DIVERSITY TRAINING

- Completed *2020 Academics for Black Survival and Wellness (A4BL)*
- Completed *Bystander Intervention to Stop Anti-Asian/American and Xenophobic Harassment* by Hollaback!
- Completed *Conflict De-Escalation Training* by Hollaback!

MEDIATION AND CRUCIAL CONVERSATIONS TRAINING

- Completed *Tennessee Rule 31 Family Mediator Training* by the Community Mediation Center (CMC)
- Completed *Crucial Conversations* by VitalSmarts
- Completed *Crucial Accountability* by VitalSmarts

IOA FACILITATED PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

- Participated in *Advocates for Fair Treatment DEI Issues IOA Webinar*
- Attended the IOA Annual Conference

Meeting Certified Organizational Ombudsman Practitioner® (CO-OP) Requirements

During FY2021, Lisa Yamagata-Lynch met the requirements for being awarded the CO-OP designation. The steps involved included completing the IOA Foundation Course, passing the written exam, completing one year of full-time service as an ombudsperson, and being interviewed by the certification review committee chair. The timeline by which certification was awarded is shown in **Figure 1**.



Other Certifications

The ombudsperson obtained several certifications during FY2021 to become qualified in skills and content that can bring new opportunities to the university community. The following certifications were awarded:

- VitalSmarts Crucial Conversations Certified Trainer
- VitalSmarts Crucial Accountability Certified Trainer with Provisional Status
 - Association for Talent Development Coaching Certificate



Internal Outreach and Professional Development Services

As part of regular services, the ombudsperson facilitated a total of 27 outreach and professional development services through synchronous virtual meetings. The event that yielded the highest demand was Introduction to Ombuds Services. In this session the participants were introduced to Office services and IOA principles related to independence, impartiality, confidentiality, and informality. There were a total of 16 Office introduction sessions offered at unit/department meetings, staff/faculty representative meetings, employee orientations, commission meetings, leadership meetings, and at Graduate School Orientation.

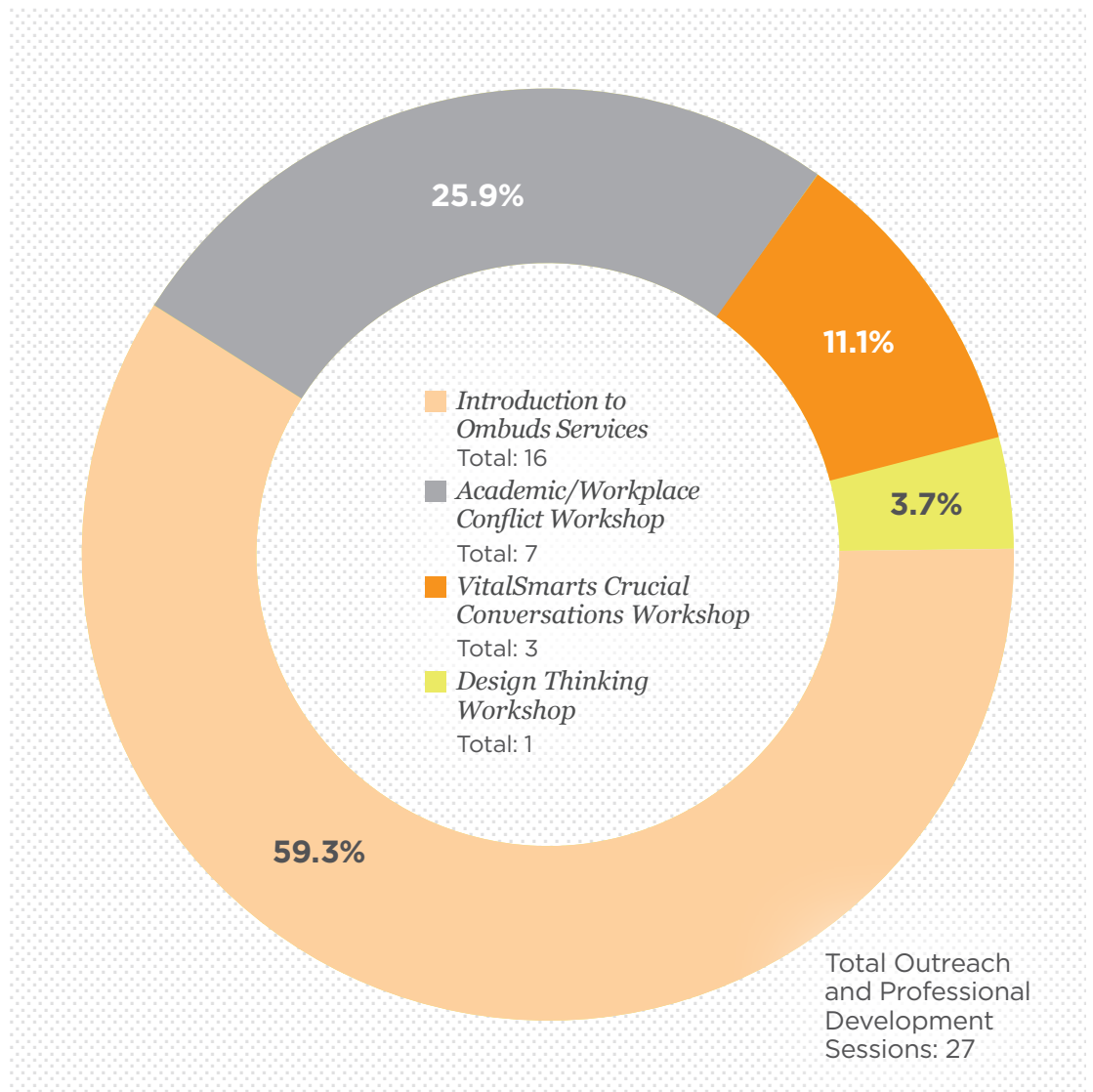
There were two FY2020 recommendations from the annual report related to providing professional development. The first recommendation was providing university leadership with training in difficult conversations. To address this recommendation, the ombudsperson became a VitalSmarts Crucial Conversations certified trainer. Crucial Conversations (Patterson, Grenny, McMillan, & Switzler, 2011) is proprietary content owned by VitalSmarts. During FY2021, the ombudsperson facilitated a Crucial Conversations workshop to 3 units on campus with a total of 54 participants. The second recommendation was developing an in-house workshop on difficult conversations. To address this recommendation, the ombudsperson designed and developed two 90-minute workshops that included:

- Understanding and Addressing Academic/Workplace Conflict
- Design Thinking for University Leaders, Faculty, Staff, and Graduate Students

Detailed descriptions of both workshops are provided on the Office website, and both workshops can be scheduled on demand by units and departments. In FY2021, there were a total of 7 sessions facilitated for the Understanding and Addressing Academic/Workplace Conflict workshop with approximately 12 to 50 participants per session, and 1 session facilitated for the Design Thinking for University Leaders, Faculty, Staff, and Graduate Students workshop with approximately 15 participants.

Figure 2 provides a summary of internal outreach and professional development services the ombudsperson facilitated.

FIG. 2: FY2021 OUTREACH AND PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT SERVICES



As an additional outreach service, the ombudsperson, in collaboration with Office of Information Technology (OIT), designed and developed the “Introduction to the Office of Ombuds Services” 6-minute video. This video was created to make information regarding the Office accessible to a wide audience during the pandemic. According to the YouTube video channel statistics, this video has been accessed by 198 viewers since it was made available in October 2020.

As another outreach, on Ombuds Day, celebrated on the second Thursday of October, the ombudsperson facilitated the inaugural Ombuds Virtual Data Showcase. During this event, the ombudsperson presented information from the FY2020 Office Annual Report. The Ombuds Virtual Data Showcase will be facilitated annually on Ombuds Day.

Program Evaluation Planning

Program evaluation planning continued to move forward in FY2021. The ombudsperson partnered with three graduate students from the Educational Psychology and Counseling Department who were enrolled in EDPY 651 Advanced Seminar in Evaluation 1. The graduate student team reviewed the existing program evaluation plan the ombudsperson developed in FY2020, and engaged in a literature review, collection of benchmark data, and created new program evaluation surveys.

Office Recognition from Internal and International Organizations

As an active member of the university community, the ombudsperson engaged in several campus activities. These activities are listed in **Table 1**. As an active member of the ombuds professional community the ombudsperson engaged in several professional services offered by invitation. These activities are listed in **Table 2**.

TABLE 1: CAMPUS-WIDE SERVICES		
	CO-CHAIR	MEMBER
COMMITTEES AND TASK FORCES	Workplace Bullying Task Force	Diversity Leads Group Intercultural Development Inventory (IDI) Campus Implementation Advisory Group Provost’s Office Faculty Review and Promotion Task Force Equity Support Team StaffAdministrativeLeadershipRetreatPlanning Team UT Action Collaborative UT System Online Steering Committee UT Technology Faculty Fellows
	MODERATOR	PANEL MEMBER
PANEL EVENTS	Making Visible the Racialized Experiences of UT’s AAPI Women Faculty Tickle College of Engineering Media Club: Myth of the Model Minority	Center for Health and Education and Wellness “Healthy Communication in the Workplace” College of Education, Health, and Human Sciences (CEHHS) “Exploring Inequities in Education” honoring Women’s History Month HR Strategies for Promoting Community & Self-Care During Turbulent Times HR Supervising Remote Staff

TABLE 2: SERVICES TO PROFESSIONAL COMMUNITY	
EVENTS/CONSULTATIONS	
IOA CONFERENCE	Facilitated IOA conference concurrent session about “Data visualization: What data to collect, how to analyze, how to visualize, how to create Ombuds services data dashboards, and engaging in a data showcase”
SERVICE TO IOA	Invited by the IOA Executive Director to the IOA Effectiveness Project
WORKSHOP FACILITATION	Kennesaw State University School of Conflict Management Summer Institute, facilitated “Demystifying Ombuds Work” workshop

Visitor Traffic

While maintaining confidentiality, the ombudsperson identified the following metrics to examine visitor traffic trends:

- **Visitors:** A metric for how many visitors come to the Office every month. A visitor is tallied as one visitor no matter how frequently they visit in a month. When visitors come to the office for more than one month, they are tallied as a visitor in the first month as well as the following month(s).
- **New Cases:** A metric for the number of cases that is introduced to the Office for the first time whether they involve one visitor or multiple visitors.
- **Ongoing Cases:** A metric for the number of cases that require visitors to come to the Office for multiple months.
- **Visitor Intensity:** A metric for the frequency at which visitors came to the Office—one time or multiple times in a given month.
- **Touchpoints:** A metric for how many people other than visitors the ombudsperson met with regarding a visitor's situation. The ombudsperson contacts touchpoints only after visitors provide permission.



Visitors and Cases

Visitors met with the ombudsperson steadily throughout FY2021. Total traffic to the Office included 401 visitors involving 197 unique cases. **Figure 3** shows the monthly visitor traffic including total visitors, total new cases, ongoing cases, and total cases. As seen in the figure, March and April were the highest trafficked months. During those months staff, non-tenure track faculty, and tenure track faculty were preparing responses to their Annual Performance and Planning Review (APPR) as well as tenure review outcome letters. In some cases, the ombudsperson attended APPR meetings as an impartial party to help communication flow between employees and supervisors as well as between faculty and department heads/directors, and/or deans.

Table 3 shows the total number of annual visitors based on their roles at the university. Tenure track faculty was the largest group to visit the Office, but some faculty were visiting on behalf of their graduate students. In these situations, tenure track faculty were worried that students may not visit the ombudsperson on their own. Therefore, they visited the ombudsperson to discuss how to best support their students. It should be noted that many graduate students who came to the Office did so after receiving advice from their department heads/directors and/or director of graduate studies.

Figure 4 shows a monthly visitor traffic comparison by fiscal year since the Office was established in May 2019. There is limited FY2019 data therefore, the comparison discussion focuses on FY2020 and FY2021. Between FY2020 and FY2021, traffic increased by 144 visitors. In FY2021, there were fewer visitors compared to FY2020 in December and June. This likely occurred because in December 2020 the ombudsperson was on a Family Medical Leave for 3 weeks, and in June 2020 she was on Annual Leave for a week.

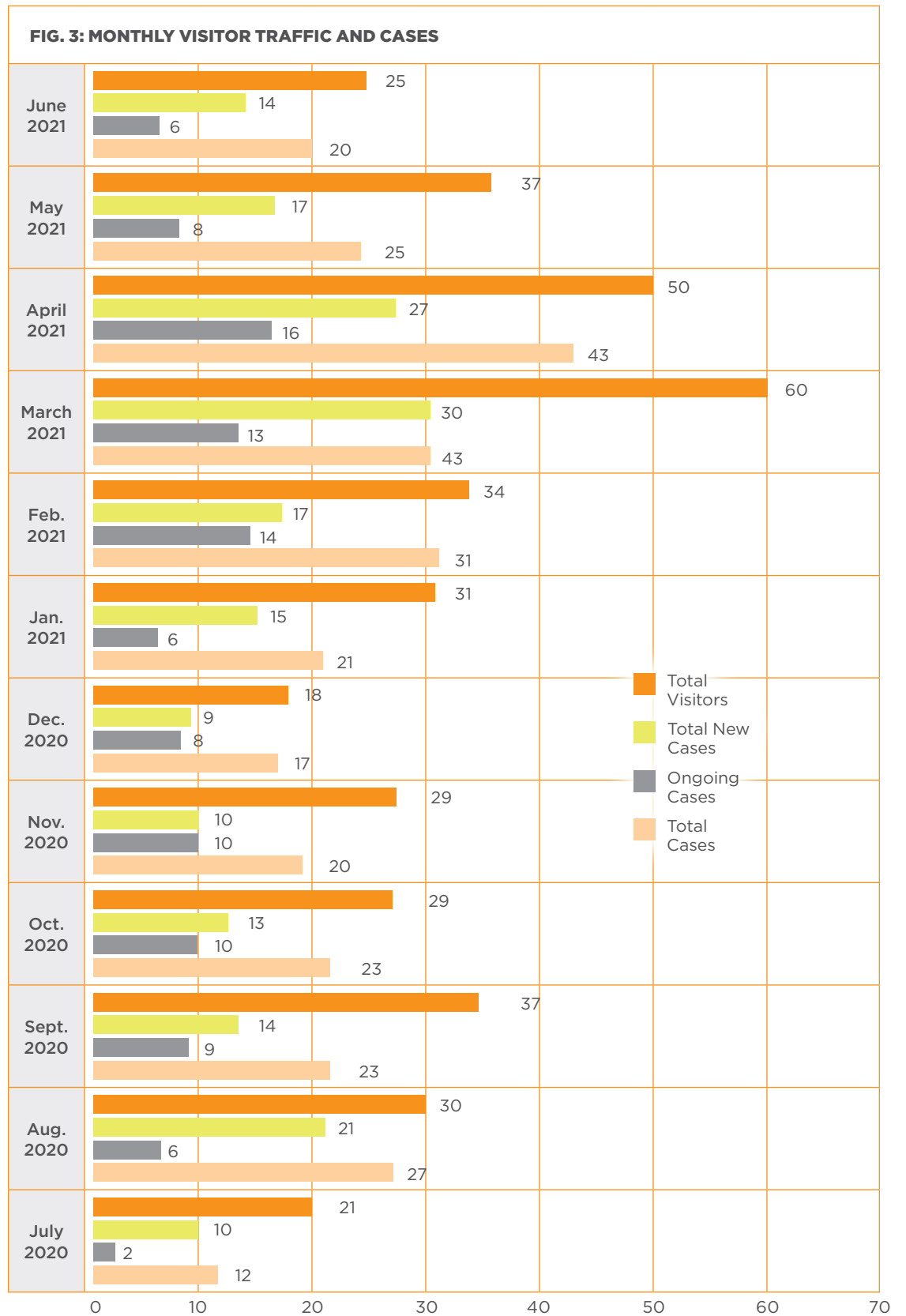
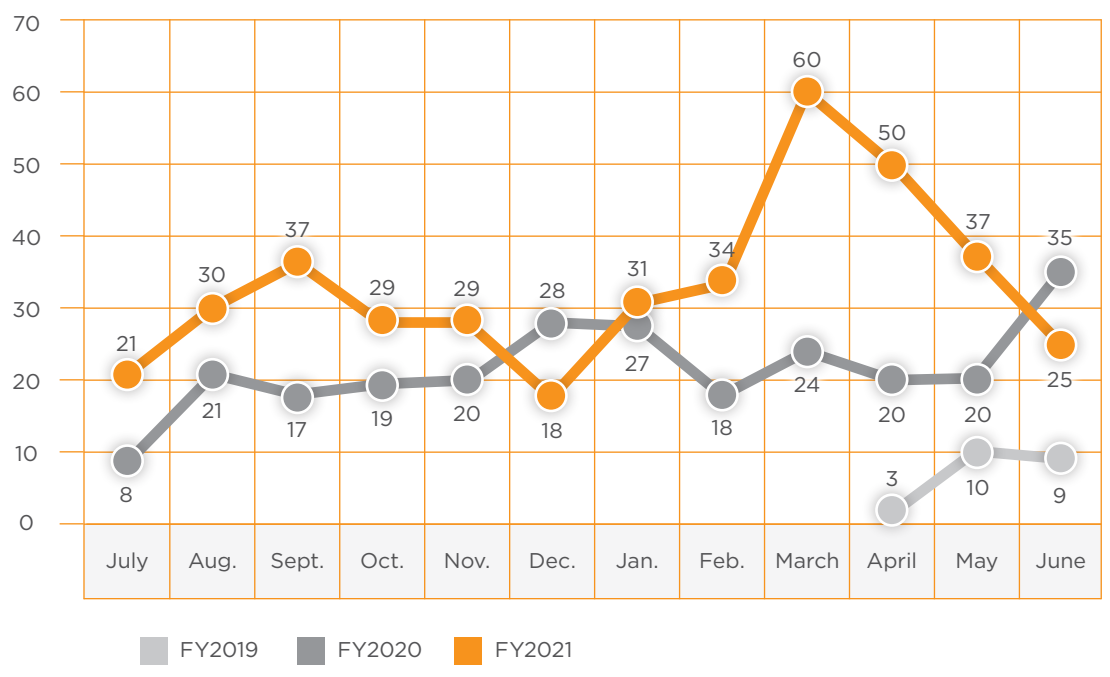


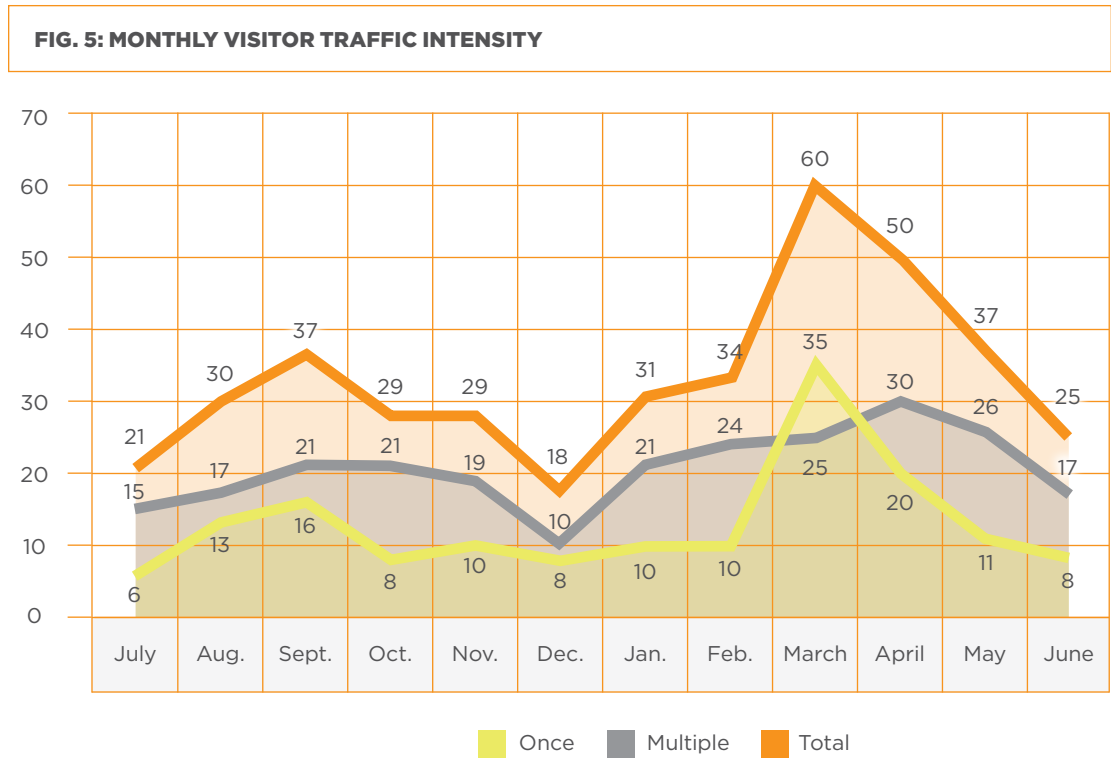
TABLE 3: TOTAL VISITORS BY ORGANIZATIONAL ROLE	
GRADUATE STUDENTS	56
STAFF	80
NON-TENURE TRACK FACULTY	64
TENURE TRACK FACULTY	111
DEPARTMENT/UNIT SUPERVISORS	68
UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS	12
OUTSIDE OF UT	10
TOTAL VISITORS	401

FIG. 4: MULTIYEAR MONTHLY VISITOR TRAFFIC COMPARISON



Visitor Intensity

As explained earlier, visitor intensity is a metric for assessing whether visitors met with the ombudsperson one time or multiple times in a given month. **Figure 5** shows the monthly visitor intensity compared to the total visitors for each month. For example, during the month of August there were 30 total visitors to the Office, 13 who visited once and 17 who visited multiple times.



Typically, when visitors experienced complex situations, they met with the ombudsperson multiple times in a month. After visitors shared their experiences in one meeting, they took some time to reflect on their own, then came back for another meeting to work on how to make an empowered decision. Many visitors who came to the Office one time in a month were interested in clarification of facts as well as policies and procedures.

**Between FY2020 and FY2021,
traffic increased by
144 visitors.**

Visitor Case Touchpoints

Another measure to record visitor activity is touchpoints. Touchpoints are people from partner offices who the ombudsperson met with on behalf of visitors (with their permission) to obtain information. For example, a visitor may ask the ombudsperson to meet with Human Resources and request how a specific policy may be applied to a hypothetical scenario. **Table 4** shows how many touchpoints the ombudsperson met with regarding a visitor case each month. The monthly frequency of touchpoint visits was generally zero or one, with some visitor cases involving two to three touchpoints. A small number of visitor cases involved four or five touchpoints.

TABLE 4: MONTHLY VISITOR TOUCHPOINTS						
TOUCHPOINTS	0	1	2	3	4	5
JUNE-21	8	14	3			
MAY-21	16	15	6			
APRIL-21	21	19	8	2		
MARCH-21	24	25	11			
FEBRUARY-21	15	16	2	1		
JANUARY-21	13	13	2	3		
DECEMBER-20	9	6	3			
NOVEMBER-20	8	6	7	7	1	
OCTOBER-20	7	4	9	6	2	
SEPTEMBER-20	20	5	9	3		
AUGUST-20	8	9	9	2		2
JULY-20	5	10	6			
TOTAL TOUCHPOINTS	154	142	75	24	3	2

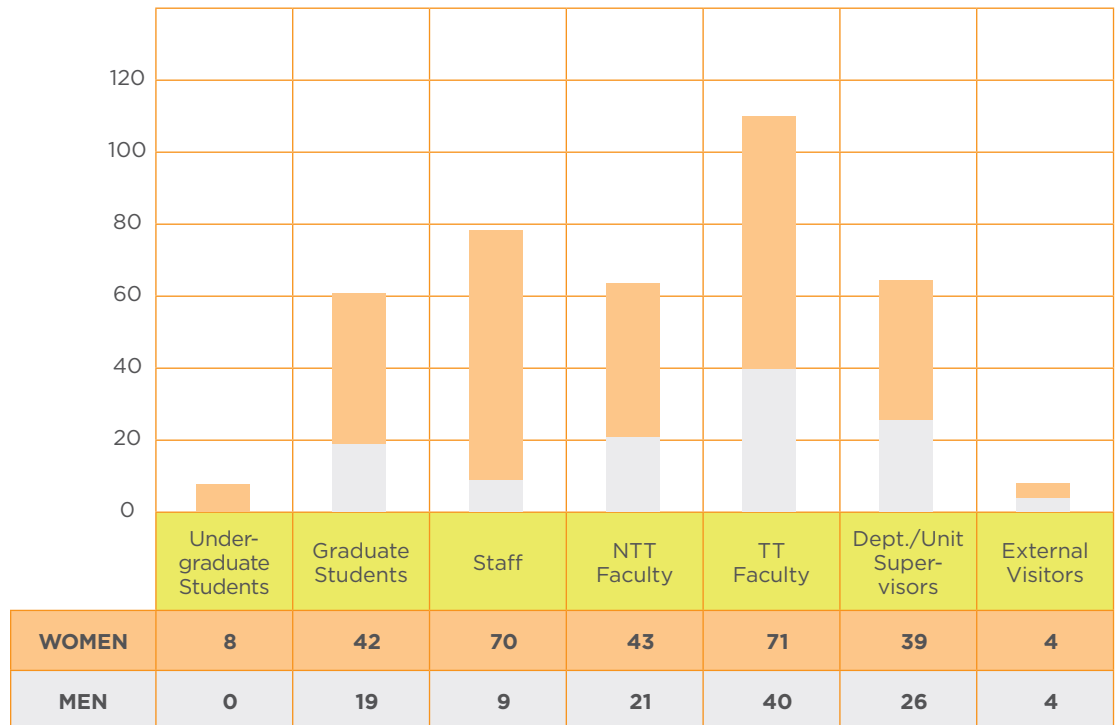
When visitors did not want to ask questions to formal offices themselves, they gave permission to the ombudsperson to contact them anonymously.

Visitor Demographics

GENDER

Figure 6 shows gender distribution of visitors based on their role at the university. Among graduate students, staff, non-tenure track faculty, and tenure track faculty there were considerably more visitors who were women than men. Within these groups, there were 226 visitors who were women and 89 visitors who were men. Within department/unit supervisors 39 visitors were women and 26 visitors were men. While the Office of Ombuds Services does not directly work with undergraduate students or visitors external to the university, there were some visitors who met with the ombudsperson from these groups. Within these groups there were more visitors who were women than were men.

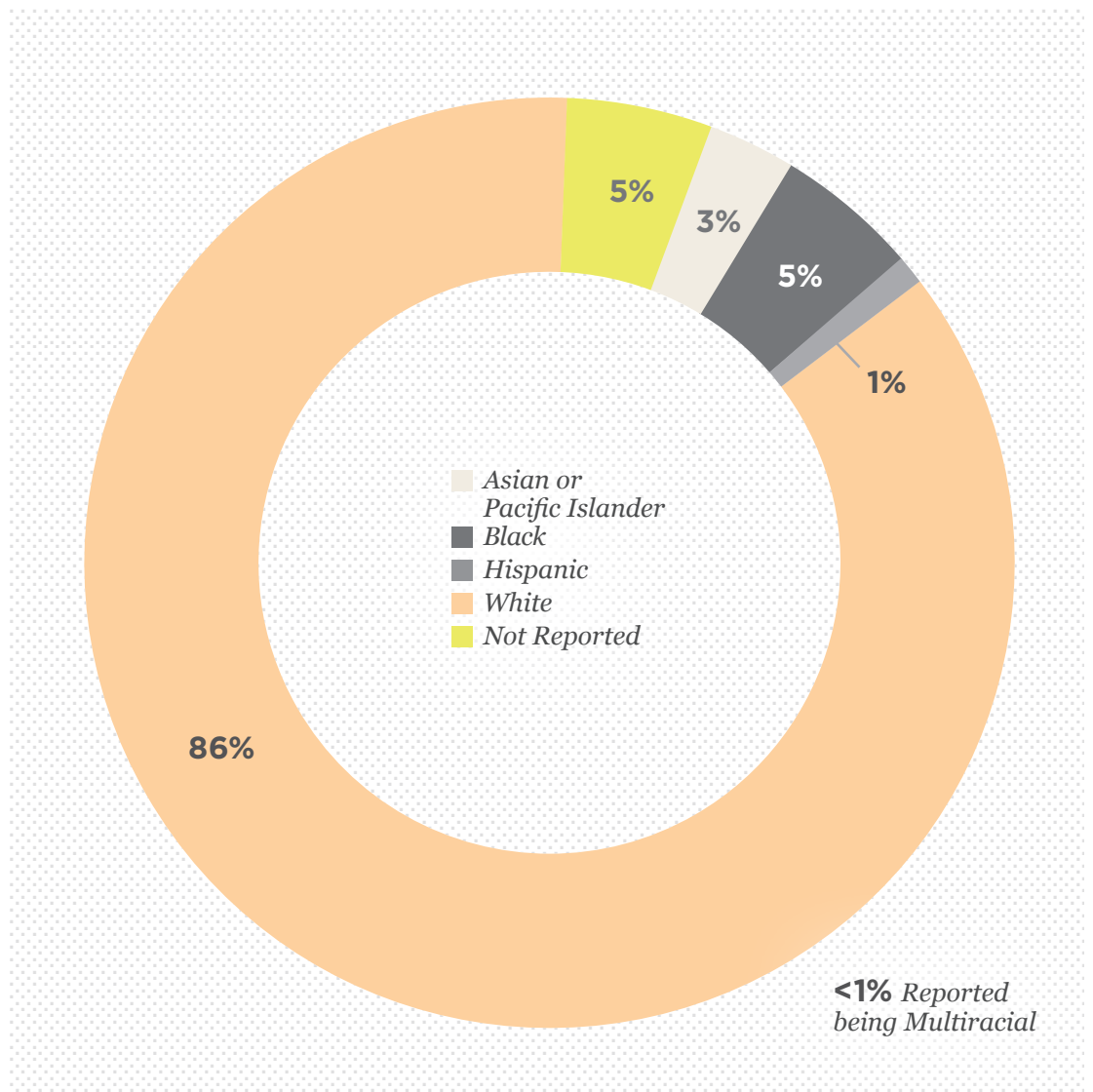
FIG. 6: VISITOR GENDER DISTRIBUTION



RACE

Figure 7 shows the FY2020 visitor race information based on EEO category and race data available in the human resources system. Visitors for whom race information was not available, are marked “not reported.”

FIG. 7: VISITOR EEO CATEGORY AND RACE

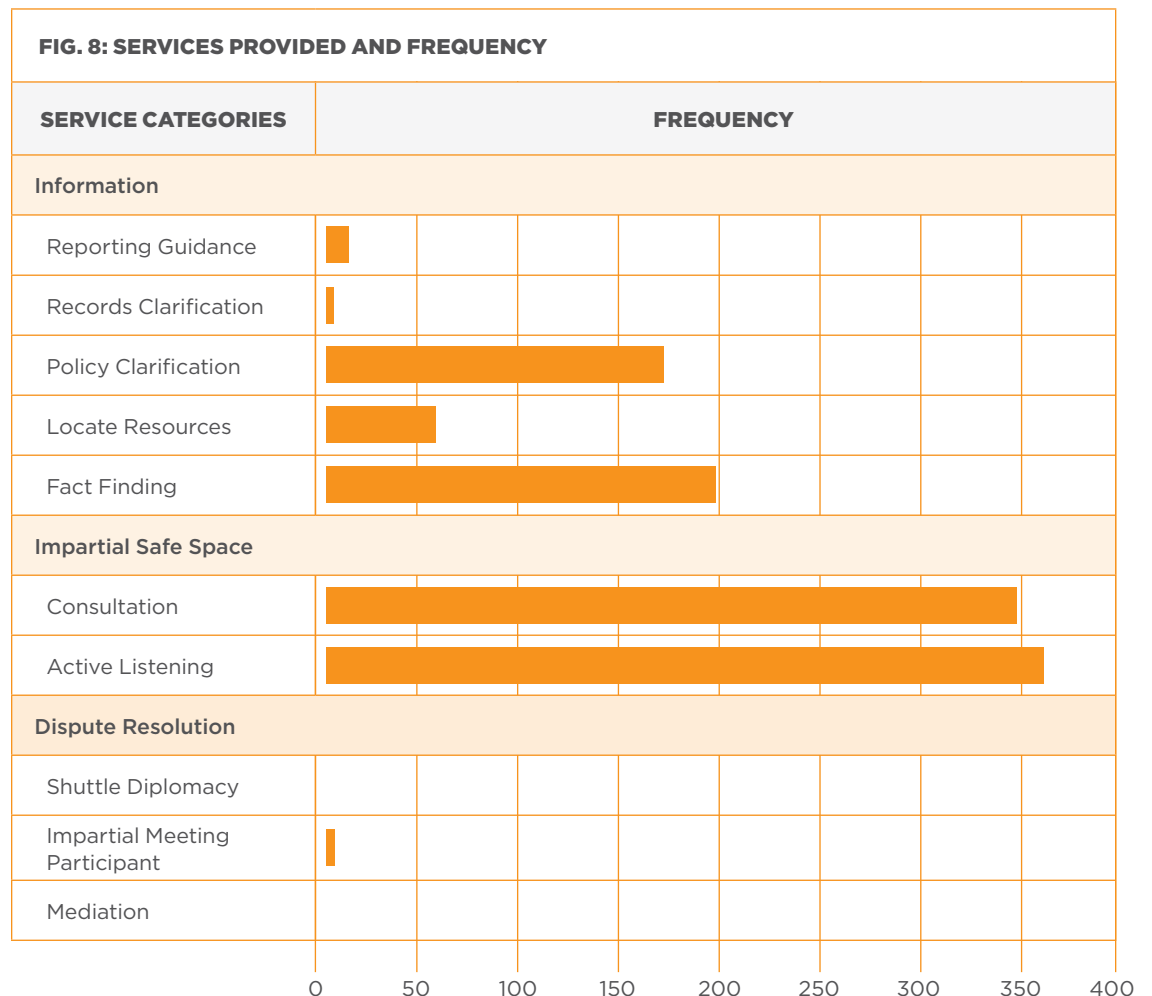


Visitor Shared Experiences

Services Provided to Visitors

Figure 8 shows the frequency of services offered to visitors that include providing: (a) information, (b) impartial safe space, and (c) dispute resolution. Sub-activities to each service is included in the figure. The total number of services provided is greater than the total number of visitors because many visitors came to the Office seeking multiple services. Visitors came to the Office most frequently to have access to an impartial safe space, where they could consult with the ombudsperson while she engaged in active listening. Many visitors commented that the Office of Ombuds Services was the one place where their voices could be heard.

The ombudsperson also assisted visitors who wanted to gain information about university policies, procedures, and resources. With this new information, visitors were better prepared to make empowered decisions while weighing multiple options. After these sessions, some visitors chose to report their situation to the Office of Equity and Diversity (OED) as well as 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 them identify a list of questions to ask the appropriate formal office(s). When visitors did not want to ask the questions themselves, they gave the ombudsperson permission to contact formal offices.



There was a small number of visitors who came to the office seeking advice regarding dispute resolution. All requests for dispute resolution involved the ombudsperson attending a meeting between an employee and supervisor as an impartial party. Among the visitor group, graduate students did not request the ombudsperson to be present at meetings as an impartial party. In most cases this was because visitors did not want their supervisor to know that they had spoken to the ombudsperson regarding their concerns.

Visitor Session Activities

Figure 9 shows a graphic representation of the different types of session activities visitors engaged in with the ombudsperson. When meeting the ombudsperson, visitors explored what empowered decisions they could make as a best course of action for themselves. Not all visitors engaged in every activity represented in Figure 9. **Table 5** shows how often visitors engaged in each activity as well as sub-activities. 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 idea generation and problem-framing.

FIG. 9: VISITOR SESSION ACTIVITIES



TABLE 5: VISITOR SESSION ACTIVITIES WITH FREQUENCY	
SESSION ACTIVITY & SUB-ACTIVITY	FREQUENCY
Coaching	192
Academic	32
Career	85
Crucial Conversation	60
Explore Choices	99
Leadership	29
Problem Solving	236
Idea Generation	177
Problem Framing	178
Problem Tackling	96
Situation Assessment	111
Cost vs. Benefit	59
Resources	48
Wants and Needs	83

Themes in Visitor Conversational Narratives

STAFF AND FACULTY VISITORS' CONCERNS ABOUT JOB SECURITY

Staff visitors' concerns about job security were related to whether their supervisors were in the process of assigning them a low APPR assessment score and/or terminating their position. These concerns often started with one or more of the following scenarios that staff visitors experienced: (a) receiving an oral and/or written warning, (b) receiving a Performance Improvement Plan (PIP), (c) being assigned to a new supervisor, (d) performance expectations changing with or without updates to position description, and (e) changes in evaluative relationships with supervisors. These situations led staff visitors to experience a sense of being bullied and to become fearful of potential undesirable reactions from supervisors if they were to ask questions or seek help.

Non-tenure track faculty visitors' concerns about job security were related to their appointment renewal. These concerns often started with one or more of the following scenarios that non-tenure track faculty visitors experienced: (a) receiving a lower than usual APPR assessment, (b) changes in teaching assignments, (c) changes in scheduling and/or classroom assignments, (d) not getting teaching modality requests approved, and (e) unusual circumstances that came about in the classroom and/or the department. Another observation that may be unique to FY2021 regarding non-tenure track faculty visitor job security concerns stemmed from faculty not being certain about how the impending changes to the university budget model could affect them. These situations led non-tenure track faculty visitors to experience a sense of being powerless in the face of uncertainties and to become fearful of potential undesirable reactions from department heads/directors and/or deans if they were to ask questions.

Tenure track faculty visitors' concerns about job security were related to the tenure and/or promotion process. Tenure track and tenured faculty visitors who were in the middle of tenure and/or promotion review came to the Office with concerns related to responses they received in various stages of the review process. Additionally, tenured faculty came to the Office with concerns that their promotion review was procedurally stuck and not progressing forward. These situations led tenure track faculty visitors to experience a sense of being powerless and became fearful of potential undesirable reactions from department heads/directors and/or deans if they were to ask questions.

GRADUATE STUDENT VISITORS' CONCERNS ABOUT EVALUATIVE RELATIONSHIPS

Graduate student visitors' concerns about evaluative relationships frequently stemmed from communication challenges. These concerns often started with one or more of the following scenarios that graduate student visitors experienced: (a) unclear work expectations for graduate research assistant/graduate teaching assistant, (b) unclear authorship policy within research teams, (c) inequitable treatment of graduate students within research teams based on gender, race, and nationality often reflected in tasks assigned, and (d) lack of communication from faculty to graduate students regarding work/academic expectations that would lead to a delayed graduation date. Many of these concerns led to situations where graduate student visitors needed help engaging in conversations with faculty. In a small number of situations, graduate student visitors decided to change advisors and requested help for navigating this process. These situations led graduate student visitors to experience a sense of being powerless and to become fearful of potential undesirable reactions from faculty if they were to ask questions and/or seek guidance.

UNDERGRADUATE STUDENT VISITORS' CHALLENGES WITH INTER-OFFICE COORDINATION

Undergraduate student cases came to the ombudsperson when an undergraduate student or their advisor contacted the Office. The ombudsperson often referred undergraduate student visitors to another office that is formally designated to help them, but there were few cases that the ombudsperson became the point person to consult with the student. These cases involved undergraduate student visitors who found themselves stuck in organizational processes that require inter-office coordinated communications. While these situations occurred infrequently these cases were related to financial complications that required more than one student service unit to examine and respond to complicated situations. Among these cases, there were situations wherein visitors required assistance in completing their degrees. These situations were so unique and difficult to anticipate that the university could not have identified preventative measures.

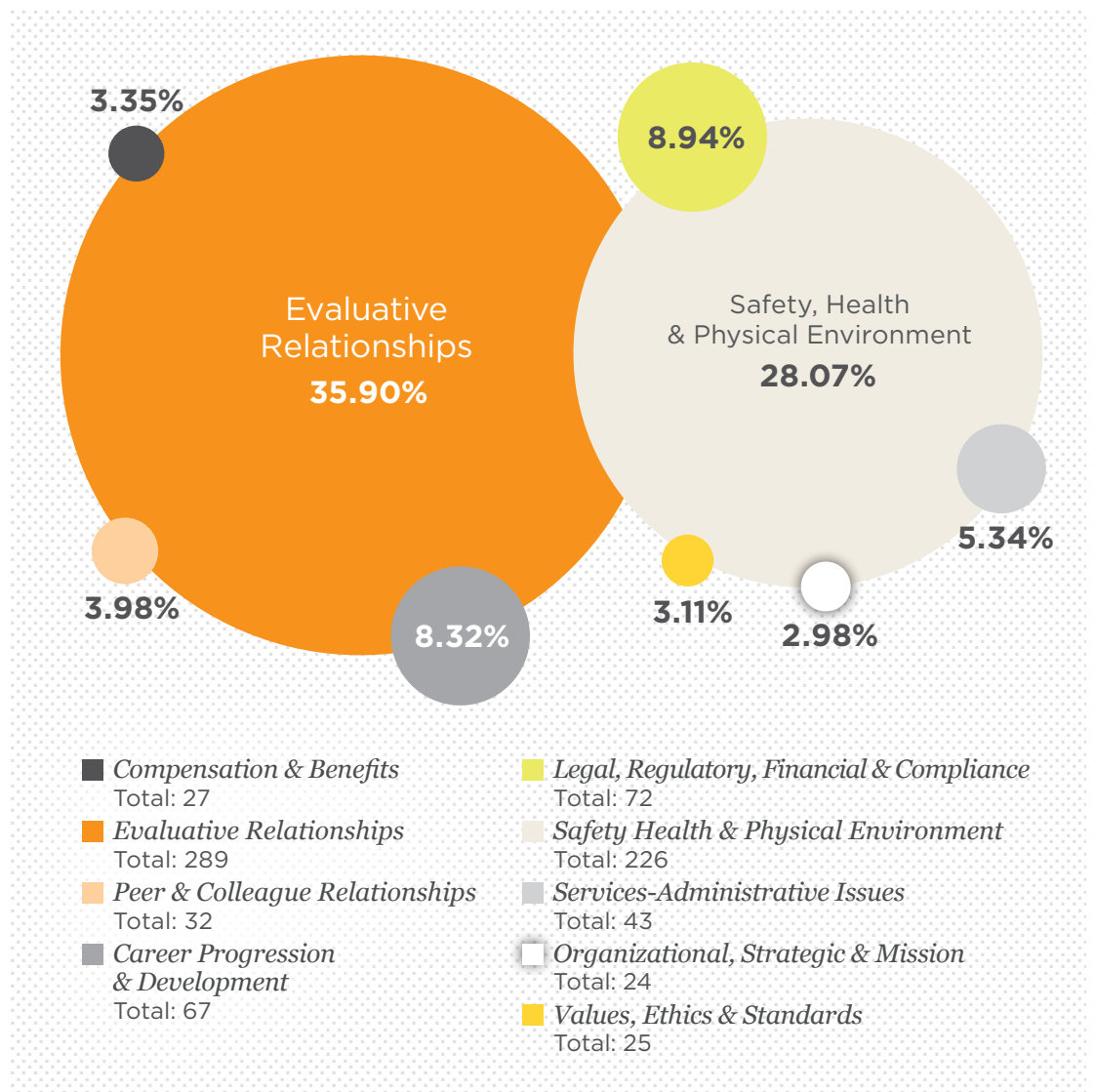
OBSERVED IOA UNIFORM REPORTING CATEGORIES THEMES

The IOA Uniform Reporting Categories include the following main themes:

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; and
9. Values, ethics, and standards.

Figure 10 shows the frequency in which each IOA Uniform Reporting Category was referenced in visitor experiences. The top two categories observed were Evaluative Relationships with 289 occurrences and Safety, Health, and Physical Health with 226 occurrences. This overall trend was similar to observations from FY2020. Within Evaluative Relationships the top subcategories referenced were Communication with 227 occurrences, Trust-Integrity with 201 occurrences, and Respect-Treatment with 185 occurrences. These tensions were observed between graduate students and instructors/advisors/supervisors, staff and their supervisors, and faculty and department heads/directors and/or deans. Within Safety, Health, and Physical Health the top subcategory was Work Related Stress and Work-Life Balance with 225 occurrences. These concerns were not related to physical safety, but instead related to stress from worrying about job security, bullying, and fear of experiencing undesirable reactions from peers and supervisors.

FIG. 10: OBSERVED IOA UNIFIED UNIFORM REPORTING CATEGORY THEMES



Findings

Findings Across Visitors

The findings in the following section are based on ombudsperson interpretations of particularities (Stake, 1995) observed in visitor experiences. The findings are not generalizable claims about the entire graduate student, staff, and faculty population. At the same time the particularities shared in the findings do not refer to any specific individual cases. Instead, the findings are presented as composite narratives of shared experiences among graduate students, staff, and faculty.



With that being said, the FY2021 Office of Ombuds Services visitor experiences indicated that graduate student, staff, and faculty encountered conflict in their evaluative relationships that originated from communication challenges. This introduced stress to visitors' workplace/academic environment, and they experienced a loss in their sense of safety. Some visitors worked with the ombudsperson to regain their sense of safety by learning and practicing healthy communication strategies. Other visitors found that communication challenges led to complications resulting in damaged evaluative relationships, and in some situations, visitors found damaged peer relationships as well. These damaged relationships became a reason why visitors found it difficult to initiate a conversation with their supervisors and maintain a healthy work-life balance.

Among the FY2021 staff visitors, some damaged evaluative relationships led visitors to experience stress induced medical conditions where they had to take Family Medical Leave. Some staff visitors decided to end their employment at the office they were experiencing difficulties and move to another unit within the university, and some staff visitors left the university entirely. Graduate student and faculty visitors who experienced stress from damaged relationships did not seem to experience the intensity of stress that staff visitors did. In many cases graduate student and faculty visitors had more autonomy and independence regarding what and where to work compared to staff visitors. Additionally, graduate student and faculty visitors tended to not be in positions that required daily communication with their supervisors. This likely provided graduate student and faculty visitors respite from the damaged relationships.

Findings from the Literature Related to Visitor Experiences

The ombudsperson engaged in a synthesis of existing literature to gain a comprehensive understanding of visitor experiences. This was guided by the following three questions that emerged throughout the data collection and analysis process:

1. What theoretical constructs help make sense of how communication challenges bring strain to visitors' evaluative relationships?
2. What theoretical constructs help make sense of harm that visitors experience from damaged evaluative relationships? and
3. How can the theoretical constructs identified from the literature help guide the university community in making sense of visitor experiences from damaged evaluative relationships?

Literature search findings will be discussed below. In this discussion supervisors refer to faculty instructors and/or advisors for graduate students, supervisors for staff, academic department heads, directors, and/or deans for faculty.

1. WHAT THEORETICAL CONSTRUCTS HELP MAKE SENSE OF HOW COMMUNICATION CHALLENGES BRING STRAIN TO VISITORS' EVALUATIVE RELATIONSHIPS?

Crucial conversations and psychological safety help explain how communication challenges that visitors experience bring strain to their evaluative relationships. Crucial conversations take place between two or more individuals about a high stakes topic in which their opinions vary, and they experience high emotions (Patterson, Grenny, McMillan, & Switzler, 2011). According to Patterson et al., when people enter crucial conversations, they often are not aware of it, and they are unable to engage in the conversation with open minds. Instead, they become narrowly focused on protecting themselves, and become unable to take part in dialogue with the conversation's original intent.

Psychological safety can be disrupted when the outcome of crucial conversations lead to a one-sided conversation or a heated argument. Psychology safety is a shared understanding among work teams where each member can engage in interpersonal risk taking by expressing and being themselves while collaboratively working towards a shared goal (Edmondson 1999; 2019). When teams share a sense of psychological safety, team members do not find the need to hold back their ideas. However, when psychological safety is disrupted, it becomes increasingly difficult for people in teams to initiate crucial conversations and engage in them productively.

Observations of visitor experiences indicated that when visitors and supervisors experienced failure in crucial conversations, it became difficult for visitors to initiate and engage in future dialogue. In this process visitors experienced a strain in their relationships with their supervisors that, in some cases, introduced long-term damage. Once visitor psychological safety was disrupted, they experienced a sense of not knowing what the best course of action may be, and feared how the situation could get worse in the future.

2. WHAT THEORETICAL CONSTRUCTS HELP MAKE SENSE OF HARM THAT VISITORS EXPERIENCE FROM DAMAGED EVALUATIVE RELATIONSHIPS?

Dignity and positionality help understand the harm that visitors experience from damaged evaluative relationships. Dignity is an inherent value and vulnerability that all human beings are born with, and it is about human connection and being understood (Hicks, 2011, 2018). According to Hicks, people never lose their dignity, but in conflict situations dignity can be violated and people can be left with a humiliated or diminished feeling when their dignity is not honored by others. This sense of harm causes reactions in the human brain similar to those caused by physical injuries, and people who violate the dignity of others are often unaware of how much harm they have inflicted on others (Hicks, 2011, 2018).

When dignity is violated, depending on the person's positionality, it can become challenging to find ways to heal. Organizational structures of universities are hierarchical, and people experience unequal power distribution in evaluative relationships. Anthias, who is a scholar of migrant people and their cultures, introduced the term *translocational positionality* to explain how people experience who they are as an individual in social spaces: their personal history and identity interact with social structures to determine their agency to access and exercise their rights (Dy, 2020; Anthias, 2008; 2011). From this perspective, peoples' self-identification of who they are as individuals and professionals within the organizational context affect their sense of belonging and ability to take action within their community.

Observations of visitor experiences showed that their sense of belonging to the university was affected by dignity violations they experienced in evaluative relationships and by their positionality. It was often very difficult for visitors to decide whether to engage in dialogue with their supervisor, report a complaint, or to do nothing. When the social structures of the university and visitors' identity and experiences did not afford them sufficient agency to regain a sense of psychological safety after a dignity violation, they became unwilling to take action. While experiencing humiliation and little agency, visitors often found a diminishing sense of belonging. Under these circumstances, when visitors chose not to engage in crucial conversations with their supervisors, they lost the opportunity to regain a sense of psychological safety and to heal from the injuries to their dignity.



3. HOW CAN THE THEORETICAL CONSTRUCTS IDENTIFIED FROM THE LITERATURE HELP GUIDE THE UNIVERSITY COMMUNITY MAKE SENSE OF VISITOR EXPERIENCES FROM DAMAGED EVALUATIVE RELATIONSHIPS?

While examining findings across visitor experiences and the literature, the ombudsperson uncovered additional findings that help make sense of visitor experiences. These findings included: (a) dignity violations where both visitors and supervisors were harmed; (b) dignity violations where visitors were harmed, but supervisors were able to set their injuries aside; (c) dignity violations where both visitors and supervisors were able to set their injuries aside; and (d) organizational processes and support from peers encouraged visitors to relive dignity violations. The observations from these findings indicated that when supervisors are dignity-conscious leaders who honor the dignity of others as well as their own, graduate students, staff, and faculty are likely to find opportunities to maintain healthy evaluative relationships.

Observations of visitor experiences indicated that when both visitors' and their supervisors' dignity were violated from communication challenges, both lost their psychological safety in the workplace/academic setting. While being in this uncomfortable situation, the unequal power distribution in the evaluative relationship put visitors in a difficult position to find creative solutions to address the situation. This often made both visitors and supervisors feel stuck and concerned about when and how the situation might make a turn for the worse.

When both visitors and supervisors experienced dignity violations from communication challenges, but supervisors were able to set their injury aside, the supervisors' psychological safety was not disrupted while the visitors' sense of safety was disrupted. Similar to the previous situation, the unequal power distribution in the evaluative relationship put visitors in too difficult a position to find creative solutions. However, in some cases, supervisors were able to initiate and facilitate crucial conversations in a manner that helped visitors regain their sense of safety so they could address the conflict together.

When both visitors and supervisors were able to set their injury from dignity violations aside, there were opportunities for crucial conversations to take place while focusing on healing and honoring dignity. The unequal power distribution was noticeable for visitors, but they were able to enter crucial conversations with a sense of safety. This provided both visitors and supervisors a chance to address the conflict creatively and work on healing from their dignity violations.

Finally, while it may be unavoidable, participating in institutional processes and receiving support from peers led visitors to relive their dignity violations. Formal processes related to filing complaints and/or appeals are in place to ensure employees and students can exercise their right to reporting and grievances. However, the process itself can cause individuals to relive their initial dignity violation and experience harm in the form of reinjury. Similarly, support from peers who cared about visitors and provided genuine words of support in some situations were encouraging visitors to relive their dignity violations. Therefore, the ombudsperson observed instances where visitors receiving words of support from peers rekindled the pain from the initial harm they experienced.

Ombuds Recommendations

Based on FY2021 findings the recommendations to the university community include:

1. Expand organizational capacity for offering crucial conversations education to graduate students, staff, and faculty.
2. Engage university leaders in education programs about dignity-conscious leaders who do no harm to others or to themselves by honoring dignity.
3. Design and develop a comprehensive on-the-job professional development program for employees and graduate students to shift the organizational culture surrounding evaluative relationships and cultivate a shared ownership of belonging in the university community by addressing crucial conversations, psychological safety, dignity consciousness, and individual as well as professional positionality.

Data Collection and Analysis Methodology

Maintaining Confidentiality in Ombuds Data Collection and Analysis

The ombudsperson identified quantitative metrics and qualitative themes to examine data using Stake's (2010) knowledge framework that refers to both statistical and professional knowledge. The ethical and practical commitments to confidentiality in the IOA Code of Ethics and Standards of Practice do not allow an ombuds to follow traditional methodological expectations for research. Therefore, while protecting confidentiality, the following strategies were put into place:

- When collecting statistical data the ombudsperson did not track individuals through multiple months, and instead simply counted the number of visitors to the Office per month,
- When collecting and analyzing qualitative data about visitor experiences, the ombudsperson did not create in-depth records, and
- When collecting both quantitative and qualitative data the ombudsperson did not associate data to information that would reveal visitor identity.

The ombudsperson relied on several digital research tools for collecting and analyzing anonymous data. Microsoft Excel and QSR Nvivo 12 were used for data entry and analysis. Excel was used for quantitative data entry and aggregate analysis of visitor traffic trends and visitor demographics. Nvivo was used for qualitative data entry and analysis of services provided, session activities, and visitor experiences. For visual analyses, Excel and EdrawMax was used for further examination of both quantitative and qualitative data.

Coding of visitor conversational narratives followed the constant comparative methodology (Charmaz, 2014; Corbin & Strauss, 2014) to identify themes that emerged as well the IOA Uniform Reporting Categories (Dale, Ganci, Miller, & Sebok, 2008). Initially, the codes that emerged from the FY2020 analyses were carried forward for FY2021. The ombudsperson also relied on existing literature as a guide throughout the coding process to identify additional emerging codes and to gain an understanding of visitor experiences. As the FY2021 data collection and analysis progressed, there were new codes that emerged from visitor experiences, and those were added to the coding process.

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). Details of each visitor narrative were not recorded, and the ombudsperson coded conversational narratives soon after meeting with a visitor based on memory of what they shared. The ombudsperson approached shared narratives as a social interaction between her and visitors that brings shape and form to ideas for visitors to engage in ongoing dialogue about their ideas as part of shared reality (Bruner, 2002). The thematic analyses took place with the assumption that people make meaning of their lives through narratives and understanding them can provide a window into how they understand their world (Kim, 2016).

Trustworthiness and Rigor in Ombuds Reporting

The ombudsperson relied on trustworthiness (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) and rigor (Tracy, 2010) as theoretical constructs in qualitative research to strengthen the credibility of findings. Following recommendations by Lincoln & Guba (1985) and Tracy (2010), the ombudsperson attempted to maintain trustworthiness and rigor by:

- Reporting on worthwhile ideas;
- Presenting theory and methods;
- Being systematic;
- Being reflexive;
- Presenting visitor world views;
- Addressing subjectivity;
- Being humble while making conclusions;
- Being transparent about methodological challenges; and
- Collecting data from multiple sources.

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