



THE OMBUDS OFFICE FOR STUDENTS AND POSTDOCTORAL APPOINTEES

2008-2009 ANNUAL REPORT

INTRODUCTION

The mission of the Ombuds Office for Students and Postdoctoral Appointees is to provide an informal dispute resolution process in which the Ombudsperson advocates for fairness, justice, respect for differences, and reasonable solutions to student and postdoctoral issues and concerns. The Ombuds Office also serves as an alert mechanism for systemic change on campus.

One of the important benefits of having the Ombuds Office for Students and Postdoctoral Appointees is that it sends the message that this institution cares about the students, staff, and faculty, as well as about fair policies and procedures, and recognizes the value of providing an informal dispute resolution resource. Those who use this office are empowered to decide for themselves how they will address their concerns and are coached in conflict resolution techniques and the language of non-defensive communication. When the participation of the Ombudsperson results in student success, it is usually a “win-win” outcome for the institution and the parties involved. When the participation of the Ombudsperson results in the avoidance of litigation and formal grievances, the administrative time and resources saved can be considerable, and negative campus publicity is avoided. When the participation helps to create an environment in which we can all work together, it supports the campus’ goal of equity and inclusion.

OUTREACH

While the daily assistance provided to students, postdocs, and others to respond to difficult situations effectively is essential, the Ombuds Office must also proactively maintain good relationships with campus administration, faculty, and staff and ensure broad campus understanding of the purpose and role of the Student Ombuds Office. During the 2008-2009 year, we met with advisors from 18 different academic programs, the Disabled Students’ Program, Transfer, Re-Entry & Student Parent Center, Berkeley International Office, Visiting Scholar & Postdoc affairs, Letters and Science Undergraduate Advising Office, as well as participating in the Fall Graduate Advisors Meeting and the ASUC Executive Leadership Training. These efforts are on-going as we reach out to other offices and programs across campus.

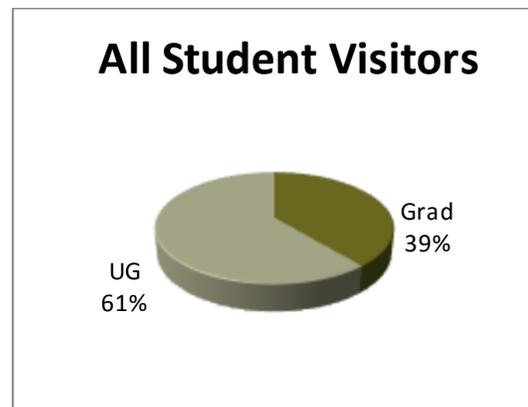
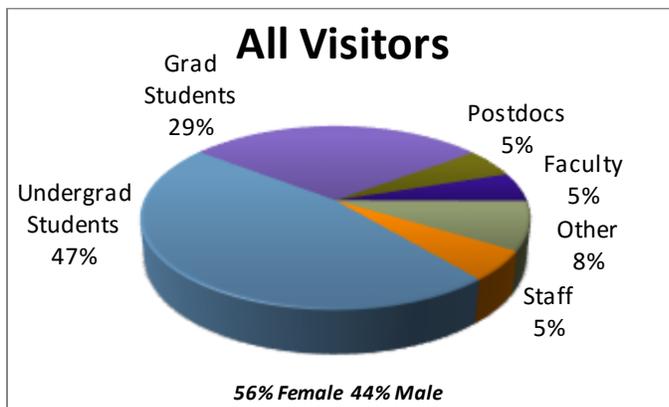
VISITORS TO THE STUDENT OMBUDS OFFICE

All of the information in this report is based on the number of new cases or issues brought to the Student Ombuds Office in 2008-2009. While some of those issues involved just one phone consultation or visit to the office, many required additional appointments, meetings with other parties, and/or phone calls, and some cases continued for several months. On average, 33% of the monthly case load was made up of issues continuing from previous months. In addition, only about 70% of the time spent on cases each month was spent on in-office appointments. The remaining time was dedicated to phone consultations and follow-up meetings with the student and/or other parties involved.

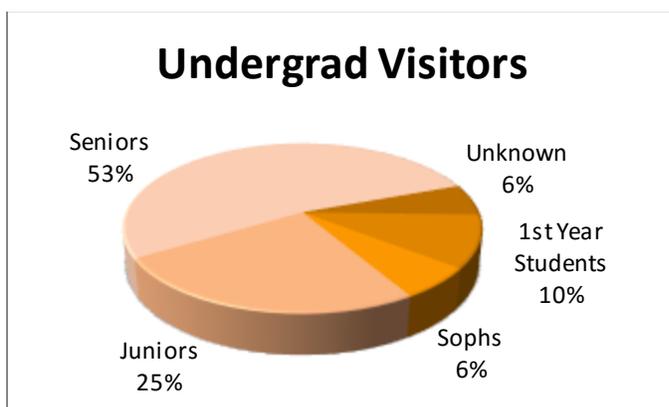


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Between July 1, 2008, and June 30, 2009, 174 individuals contacted the Student Ombuds Office for assistance with new issues. While the majority of the visitors were undergraduate and graduate students, we also assisted postdoctoral appointees, as well as faculty and staff who had student-related concerns, and other community members such as recent graduates, alumni, and parents. The breakdown reflected in the chart below is very similar to the breakdown shown in our last report (covering 12/05 – 4/08), with the exception of an increase in Undergrads (42% to 47%) and a decrease in Other (14% to 8%).



56% of the visitors to the Student Ombuds Office were women and 44% were men. Campus-wide, the split is 51% women and 49% men. Undergraduate students made up 61% of the visitors and graduate students made up 39%, although undergrads are 71% of the total UC Berkeley student population and grads are 29%.



Of the undergraduate students, 44% were Junior Transfer Students and 15% were Re-Entry Students.



THE OMBUDS OFFICE FOR STUDENTS AND POSTDOCTORAL APPOINTEES

DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION (1/2009 – 6/2009)

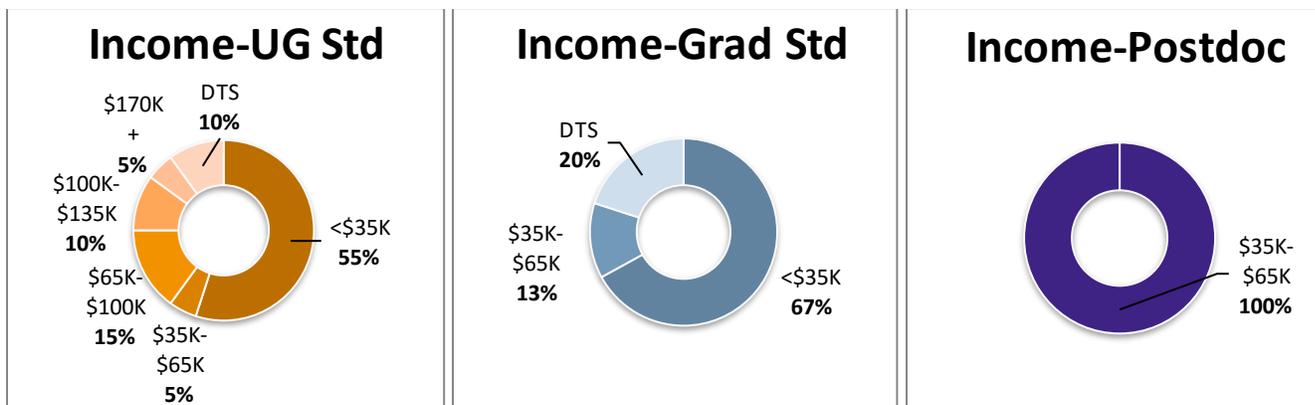
In January 2009, we began asking student and postdoc visitors to our office if they would be willing to provide demographic information. Participation is voluntary and the information is kept anonymous. The information below is based on new student visitors only, January through June. Postdoc ethnicity information is not included in the chart as the information we have from the Office of Student Research (for comparative purposes) includes only graduate and undergraduate students.

Self-Reported Ethnicity Information

Ethnicity Information from Student Visitors	Ombuds Office	Office of Std Research
Am Ind	0%	1%
Af/AfAm	11%	3%
As/AsAm	23%	32%
White	40%	34%
Chicano/Latino/Hispanic	9%	10%
Filipino	3%	3%
Other	6%	2%
Decline to State (DTS)	9%	7%
International	Tracking as of 8/09	8%

Postdocs: 50% As/AsAm, 25% Chicano/Latino/Hispanic, 25% DTS.

Self-Reported Financial Information



40% of undergrads, 80% of graduate students, and 100% of postdoctoral appointees consider themselves to be financially independent.



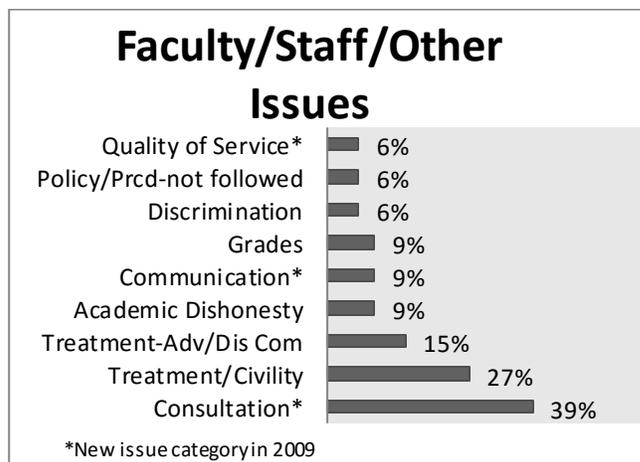
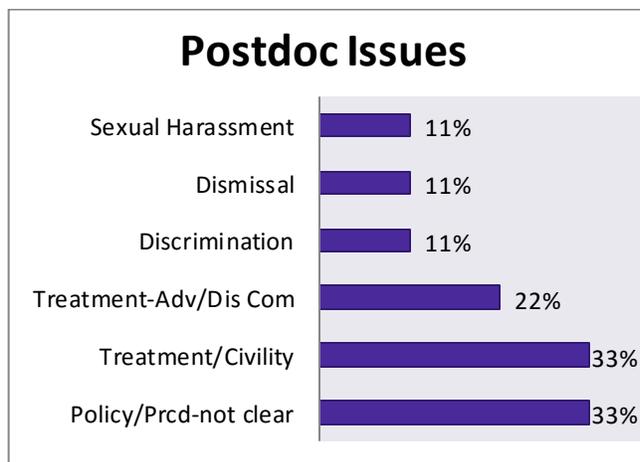
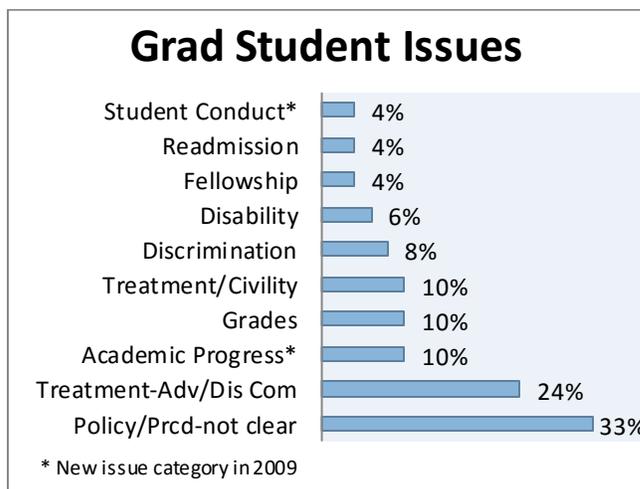
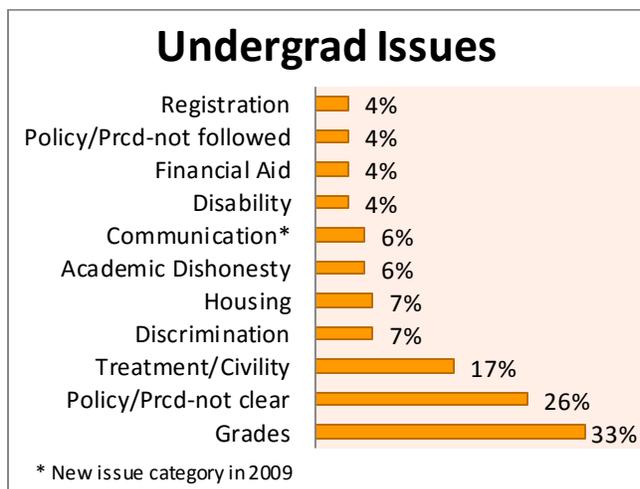
THE OMBUDS OFFICE FOR STUDENTS AND POSTDOCTORAL APPOINTEES

ISSUES BROUGHT TO THE STUDENT OMBUDS OFFICE

We currently track a wide range of issues, including the following:

Academic Dishonesty, Academic Probation, Academic Progress, Admission, Assault/Harassment, Career Path, Communication, Compensation/Bft, Compensation/Fellowship, Consultation, Dept/Org Climate, Disability, Discrimination, Dismissal, Diversity-Related, Enrollment, Facilities, Financial Aid, Financial Concerns, Grades, Health/Safety, Housing, Policy/Pracd-not clear, Policy/Pracd-not followed, Quality of Service, Rape/Assault, Readmission, Registration, Religious Accommodation, Residency, Responsiveness/Timeliness, Sexual Harassment, Student Conduct, Treatment by Advisor/Dissertation Committee, and Treatment/Civility.

The most common issues or conflicts vary by group.





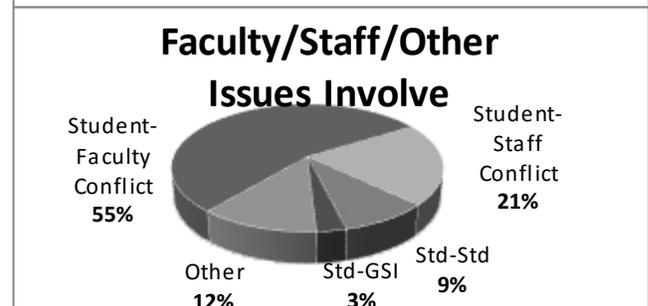
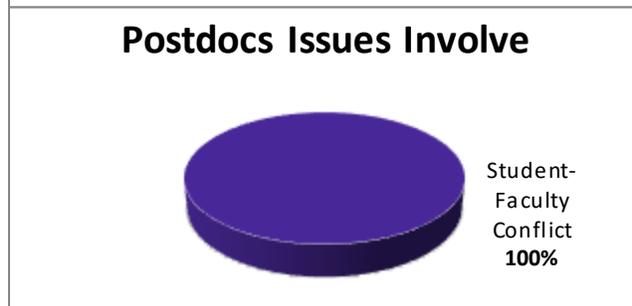
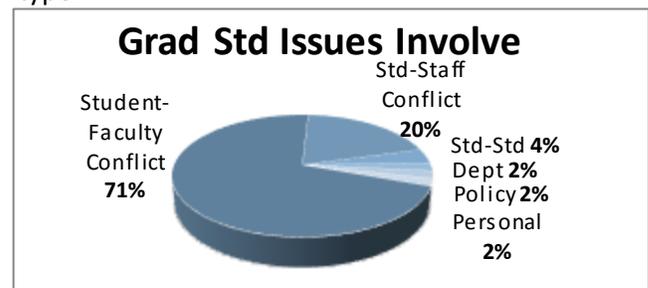
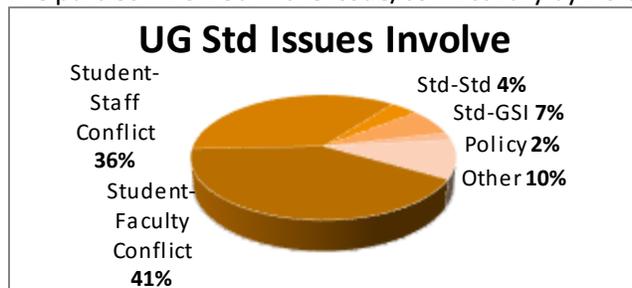
THE OMBUDS OFFICE FOR STUDENTS AND POSTDOCTORAL APPOINTEES

Most Common Issues compared to our previous report.

Undergraduate Most Common Issues		
	7/1/08-6/30/09	12/1/05-4/30/08
Grades	33%	28%
Policy/Pracd-not clear	26%	14%
Treatment/Civility	17%	23%
Discrimination	7%	
Housing	7%	
Academic Dishonesty	6%	
Communication*	6%	
Disability	4%	7%
Financial Aid	4%	
Policy/Pracd-not followed	4%	6%
Registration	4%	
Enrollment	1%	9%
* New issue category in 2009		

Grad Student Most Common Issues		
	7/1/08-6/30/09	12/1/05-4/30/08
Policy/Pracd-not clear	33%	13%
Treatment-Adv/Dis Com	24%	21%
Academic Progress	10%	
Grades	10%	7%
Treatment/Civility	10%	20%
Discrimination	8%	
Disability	6%	7%
Fellowship	4%	
Readmission	4%	
Student Conduct	4%	
Compensation	2%	7%
Dismissal	2%	7%
* New issue category in 2009		

The parties involved in the issue/conflict vary by visitor type.





THE OMBUDS OFFICE FOR STUDENTS AND POSTDOCTORAL APPOINTEES

TRENDS AND ISSUES

In the June 2008 report, three areas of concern were discussed in some depth by Carmen McKines, the previous director of the Student Ombuds Office: Treatment and Civility, Grades, and Unclear Policies and Procedures. Those three areas continue to be very common areas of concern for all visitors to the Student Ombuds Office and all three can benefit from greater attention to clear, thorough, proactive, respectful communication, both verbally and in writing. The stresses put on academic departments and other campus resources by the budget cuts, furloughs and lay-offs of the current financial situation make it even more beneficial to have clear, well-documented policies in syllabi, handbooks, and websites. Where this information is readily available to students, many misunderstandings and mistakes can be avoided.

Treatment and Civility: 18% of all visitors to the Student Ombuds Office expressed concerns about treatment and civility and an additional 11% (24% of grad students and 22% of postdocs) were specifically concerned about how they were treated by an academic advisor and/or dissertation committee member. The issues included treatment that was perceived as rude or disrespectful, lack of responsiveness to emails or meeting requests, an environment in the department or lab that the student or postdoc felt was discouraging or hostile, as well as a perceived lack of support, both academically and personally.

In many of these cases, what was said was less important than how it was said. Clearly explaining guidelines and expectations up front and doing so in a way that is direct and backed up by policies makes it less likely that communications about performance, grades, or denied petitions will be perceived as more personal in nature.

Unclear Policies and Procedures: 24% of our visitors came to the Student Ombuds Office looking for assistance navigating the university bureaucracy and understanding policies. Often the students had been given contradictory information or shuffled around to several inappropriate offices.

It is very helpful to have clear, detailed information about policies and procedures on websites and in handbooks and fliers. It is equally important that advisors know where to find this information and to whom students/postdocs should be referred if they have questions or a unique situation. In an effort to assist, advisors can inadvertently provide incomplete or inaccurate information on topics about which they have little knowledge. It is much wiser to say you'll look for the information or refer to someone who is well versed on the topic. As layoffs and other cuts affect the availability of faculty and staff and we are all asked to take on new areas of responsibility, it is crucial that we be clear about what we know and don't know so that we can get correct information to the students/postdocs and avoid misinformation that can lead to mistrust, academic difficulties, perceptions of mistreatment, and time consuming and costly grievances. We have just started tracking the number of visitors to our office who feel the situation has been exacerbated by gaps in communication resulting from budget cuts.

The Student Ombuds Office has also been listed on the FAQ pages related to some new policies. This encourages students to contact us if they have difficulties with a new policy or with a department that doesn't



THE OMBUDS OFFICE FOR STUDENTS AND POSTDOCTORAL APPOINTEES

comply with the policy and it enables us to track the types of issues that arise. We will report back, in an anonymous way, on the trends.

Grades: Concerns about grades were expressed by 20% of the total visitors - 33% of undergraduate visitors and 10% of graduate student visitors. An additional 10% of the graduate students were concerned about academic progress.

In many cases, conflict could be avoided by a thorough discussion in the course syllabus or academic program handbook of the factors that would be used to evaluate progress and determine grades and any non-academic factors like absences and class participation that could be part of that determination. In the absence of clear guidelines and grading rubrics, students can feel that more personal factors were taken into account when academic performance was evaluated.

Some helpful resources:

Barbara Gross Davis has prepared a checklist of components to include in a syllabus.

<http://teaching.berkeley.edu/docs/SyllabusComponents.pdf>

The Graduate Division's GSI Teaching & Resource Center has sample syllabi on their web site.

<http://gsi.berkeley.edu/faculty/fac300course/syllabi/syllabiintro.html>