



THE OMBUDS OFFICE FOR STUDENTS AND POSTDOCTORAL APPOINTEES

2009-2010 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. As such, the Ombuds Office tracks trends, behaviors and practices that serve as alert mechanisms for systemic and sustainable change at UC Berkeley.

The Ombuds Office for Students and Postdoctoral Appointees was established because this institution cares about and upholds its commitment to fair policies and procedures, and recognizes the value of providing an informal dispute resolution resource for the Cal community. 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. Students are given invaluable resources and information to support them in their process of exploring optimal ways of moving through challenging situations to a viable solution. The Ombuds office works toward mutual resolutions that reflect the highest vision for students, staff and faculty alike. Our participation is solely geared toward providing fair and impartial outcomes that reflect student success, minimal use of administrative resources, reducing campus liability and exposure, and ultimately, creating and maintaining an environment that furthers the campus' goal of equity, civility 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. Over the past two years we have met with advisors from about 30 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, and the Athletic Study Center, 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.

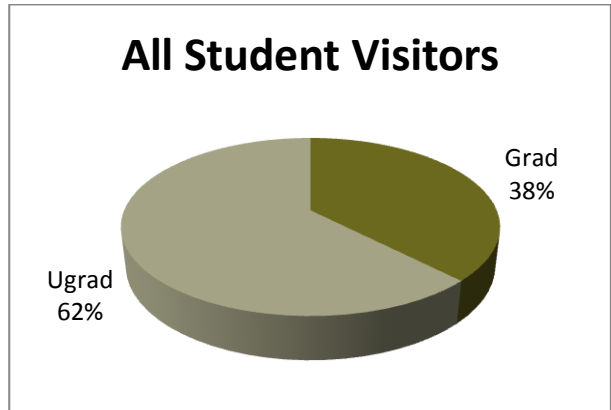
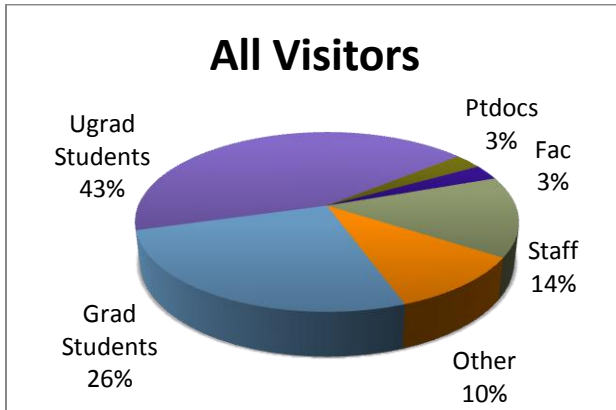
VISITORS TO THE STUDENT OMBUDS OFFICE

All of the information in this report is based on the number of new cases or issues brought to the Student Ombuds Office in 2009-2010. 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, 31% of the monthly case load was made up of issues continuing from previous months. In addition, only about 60% 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.

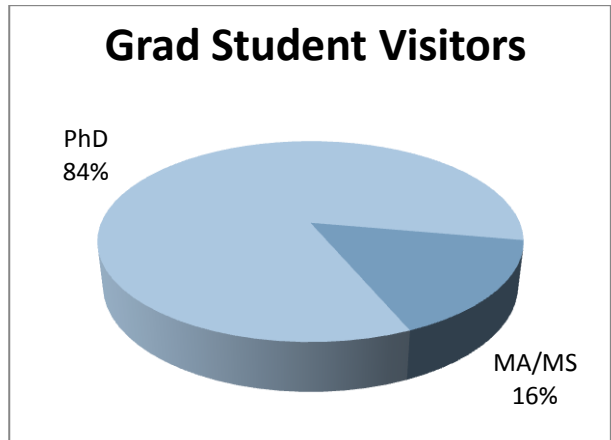
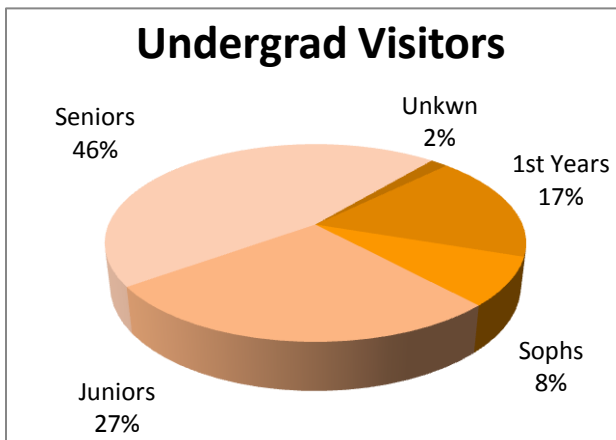


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Between July 1, 2009, and June 30, 2010, 145 individuals contacted the Student Ombuds Office for assistance with new issues. While the majority of the visitors were undergraduate and graduate students, we also assisted postdoctoral appointees, as well as faculty and staff that had student-related concerns, and other community members such as recent graduates, alumni, and parents.



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 62% of the visitors and graduate students made up 38%, although undergrads are 71% of the total UC Berkeley student population and grads are 29%.



Of the undergraduate students, 43% were Junior Transfer Students and 22% were Re-Entry Students.



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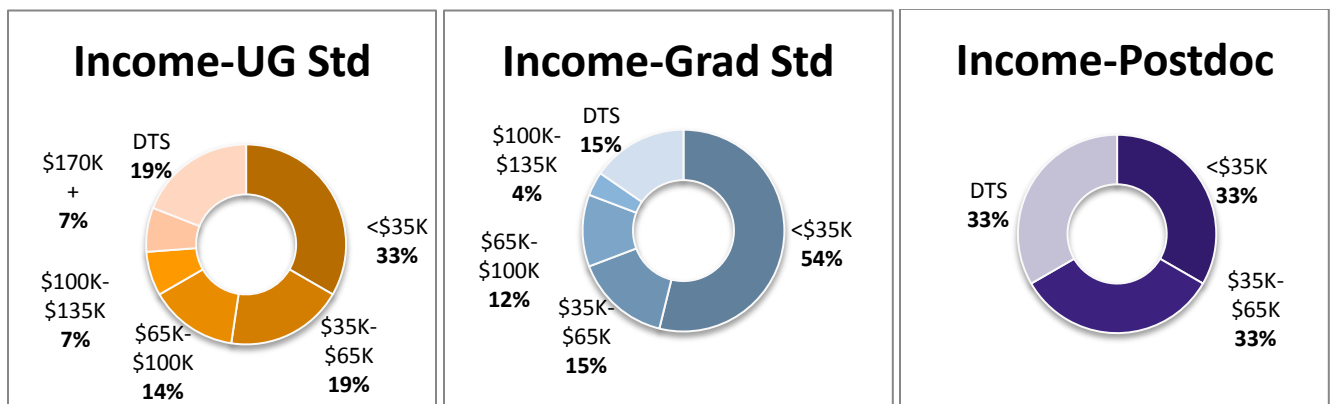
DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION (7/2009 – 6/2010)

When students and postdocs come in for an appointment, we ask them 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 & postdoc visitors only.

Self-Reported Ethnicity Information

	UG	Grad	Ptdocs
Af/AfAm	14%	4%	
Am Ind	2%		
As/AsAm	17%	15%	33%
Hist/Chic/Lat	5%	35%	
White/AsInd	24%	15%	
Mixed Race	2%	15%	
Other	2%	4%	
Not Given	33%	12%	66%

Self-Reported Financial Information



45% of undergrad visitors, 92% of graduate student visitors, and 100% of postdoc visitors consider themselves to be financially independent from parents/guardians.



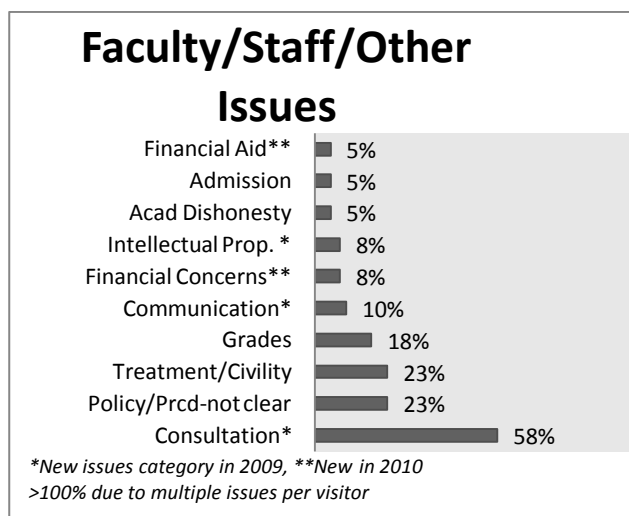
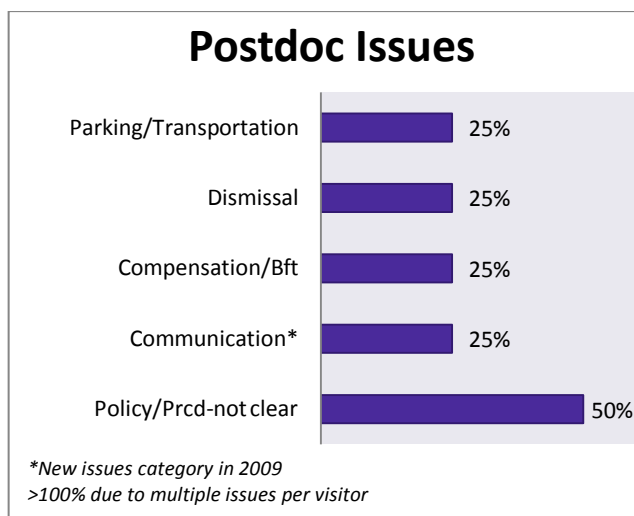
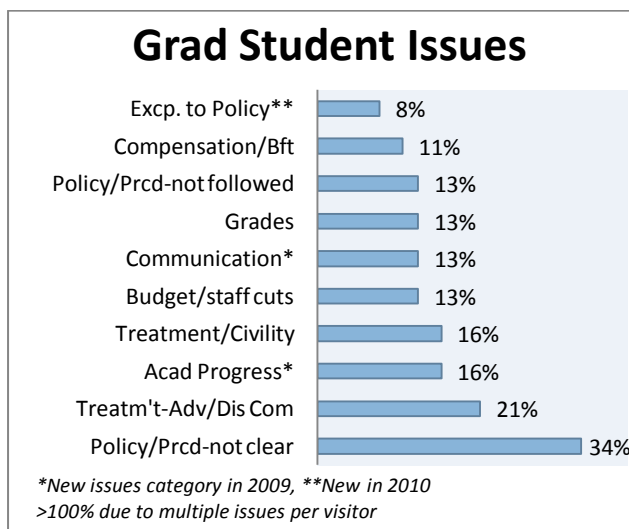
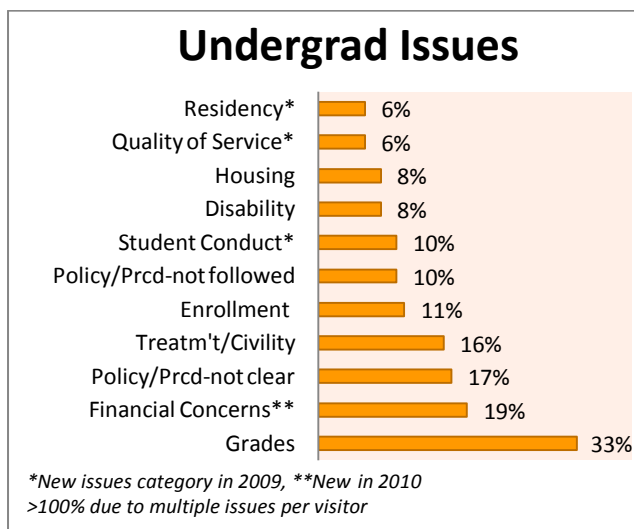
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ISSUES BROUGHT TO THE STUDENT OMBUDS OFFICE (7/2009 – 6/2010)

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.





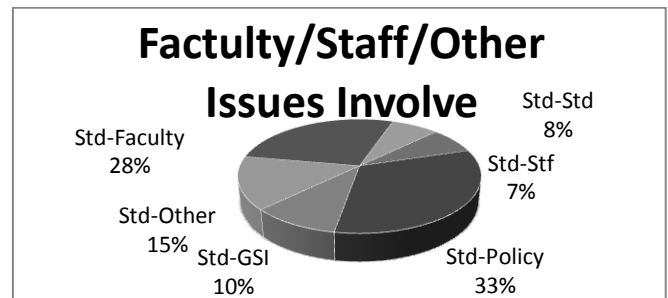
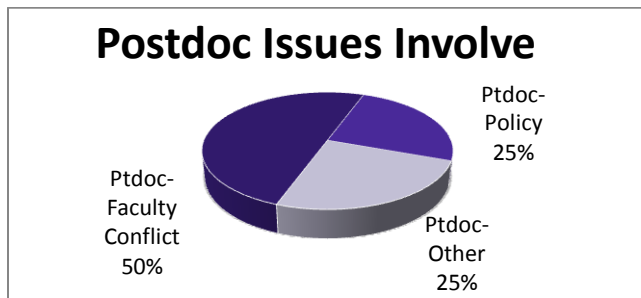
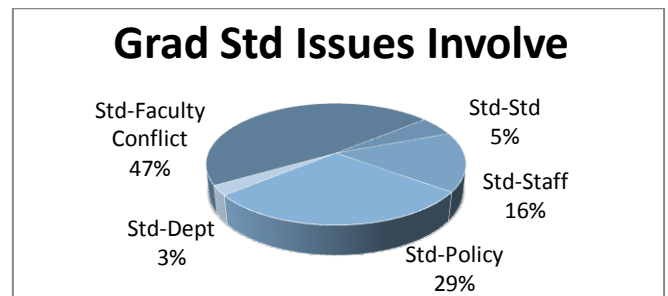
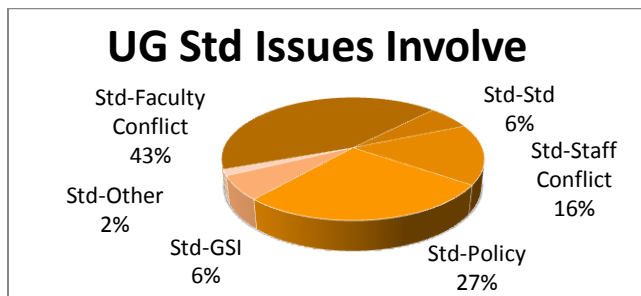
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Most Common Issues compared to our previous reports.

Undergraduate Most Common Issues			
	7/1/09- 6/30/10	7/1/08- 6/30/09	12/1/05- 4/30/08
Grades	33%	33%	28%
Financial Concerns**	19%		
Policy/Pracd-not clear	17%	26%	14%
Treatment/Civility	16%	17%	23%
Enrollment	11%	1%	9%
Policy/Pracd-not followed	10%	4%	6%
Student Conduct	10%		4%
Disability	8%	4%	7%
Housing	8%	7%	
Quality of service	6%	4%	
Residency	6%	1%	
* New issue category in 2009			
**New in 2010			

Grad Student Most Common Issues			
	7/1/09- 6/30/10	7/1/08- 6/30/09	12/1/05- 4/30/08
Policy/Pracd-not clear	34%	33%	13%
Treatment-Adv/Dis	21%	24%	21%
Academic Progress*	16%	10%	
Treatment/Civility	16%	10%	20%
Budget/staff cuts	13%		
Communication*	13%	2%	
Grades	13%	10%	7%
Policy/Pracd-not followed	13%	2%	
Compensation/Bft	11%	2%	7%
Excp to Policy**	8%		
* New issue category in 2009			
**New in 2010			

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





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TRENDS AND ISSUES

In the June 2008 report, three areas of concern were discussed: Treatment and Civility, Unclear Policies and Procedures, and Grades. 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: In 2009-2010, this was an area of concern for 16% of both the undergraduate and graduate students who visited our office. An additional 21% of the graduate students were specifically concerned about treatment received from their advisor or dissertation committee members. 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 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 somewhat arbitrary and personal in nature.

Unclear Policies and Procedures: 17% of the undergraduate visitors, 34% of the grad students, 50% of the postdoctoral appointees, and 23% of the others who contacted the Student Ombuds Office expressed concerns about navigating the university bureaucracy and understanding policies. An additional 10% of undergraduate and 13% of graduate students felt the established policies were not being followed. Often the students had been given contradictory information or shuffled around to several offices inappropriately.

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 find themselves in a unique situation. In an effort to assist, advisors can inadvertently provide incomplete or inaccurate information on topics about which they have limited knowledge. It is much wiser to promise to 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 appropriate training be provided and 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 a problem has been exacerbated by gaps in communication resulting from budget cuts. Even though that wasn't an issue category for all of 2009-2010, it was noted in 13% of the graduate student cases.)



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The Student Ombuds Office has recently 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 comply with the policy and it enables us to track the types of issues that arise. We will report back on the trends.

Grades: Concerns related to grades were expressed by 33% of undergraduate, 13% of graduate student, and 18% of other visitors to the Student Ombuds Office. An additional 16% of the graduate students were concerned about academic progress.

In many cases, conflict could be avoided by a thorough discussion in the course syllabi 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 are taken into account when academic performance is evaluated.

Some resources to help clarify expectations around grades:

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>

Financial Concerns: 19% of the undergraduate students who came to the Student Ombuds Office expressed concerns about their financial situation and 11% of the graduate students had issues related to Compensation/Benefits (an increase from our last two reports). "Financial Concerns" is an area that we just started tracking last year, so we don't have comparative information, but it isn't surprising given the national financial situation and the fee increases that students are concerned about finances and about the financial implications of other campus issues.