

Content

This annual report of the Ombuds Office for Students & Postdoctoral Appointees (hereinafter "Ombuds Office" or "Office") provides data on the volume and general characteristics of the visitors who have utilized the Office, as well as detailed information on the types of concerns addressed with those visitors. Although the data in this report captures the concerns of only a small portion of the student and postdoctoral appointee (postdoc) communities, the Office uses this data to spot behaviors, practices, and trends that can serve as alert mechanisms which inform its recommendations for systemic and sustainable change.

As an informal and confidential resource, the Ombuds Office does not keep records of specific cases. Rather, for data collection purposes, it maintains anonymized records, tracking only basic information regarding demographics and nature of dispute. Any records with personal identifying information are destroyed.

Mission

The Ombuds Office serves as an informal dispute resolution resource that advocates for equity, fairness, justice, respect for differences, and reasonable solutions to the issues and concerns of the student and postdoctoral appointee populations at UC Berkeley.

Principles of Practice

The Ombuds Office follows the International Ombudsman Association's standards of practice and code of ethics, including: *Confidentiality, Independence, Informality, and Neutrality*. The Office also upholds and promotes the mission, vision, and core values of UC Berkeley.

Executive Summary

The Ombuds Office served **211 visitors** between July 1, 2019 and June 30, 2020. This was an **18.5% increase** in visitors from the prior reporting year, and the second consecutive year the Office has experienced an increase in its number of visitors.

Some form of follow-up was requested and/or required for **43%** of all visitors. Follow-up, for the purpose of this report, means both additional appointments with visitors to discuss options and developments of their cases, and consultations with campus partners to obtain further information for visitors.

The most common concerns raised by undergraduate and graduate student visitors were about **communication, grades, treatment and civility, grade appeals, and unclear policies and procedures**.

Faculty and staff consultations were **9%** of all Office visitors. These cases can often be the most time-consuming because of their frequency for high degrees of complexity.

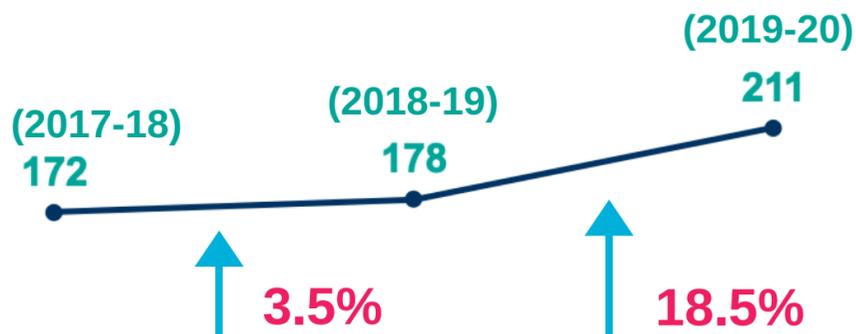
Undergraduate student visitors accounted for 62% of all student visitors and just over 46% of all visitors.



Graduate student visitors were 38% of all student visitors and roughly 28% of all visitors.

All Visitors

The 211 visitors who contacted the Ombuds Office between July 2019 and June 2020 represent an 18.5% increase from the previous reporting year, and the second consecutive year the Office saw an increase in visitors.

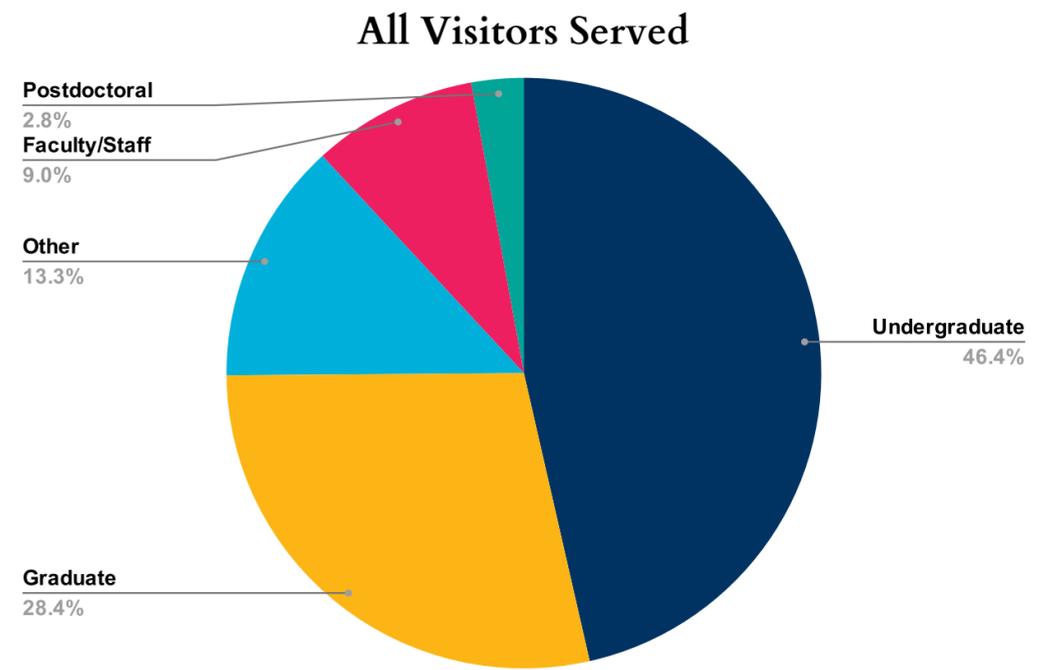


The most likely reason for a rise in visitors is an increased awareness of the Office, possibly due to outreach efforts and word-of-mouth recommendations. Another is the impact of the public health and sociopolitical events that occurred at the latter end of the reporting year. Despite an initial lull in visitor contacts following the move to remote instruction in mid-March, the Office saw an uptick in visitors in May and June. A significant number of these visitors expressed concerns related to department/org climate, academic progress, and grades.

An increase in concerns related to academic progress and grades at the tail end of an academic semester is not uncommon, so the ramifications of the aforementioned public health and sociopolitical events that defined the end of the 2019-20 reporting year may have yet to be fully realized. The Office is continuing to monitor the impact of these events on its visitors during the 2020-21 reporting year.



In addition to students and postdoctoral appointees, the Ombuds Office served faculty, staff, and members of the broader university community regarding student and postdoc-related concerns. Of its visitors, roughly 75% were students, 9% were faculty/staff, and the remaining 16% included alumni, concurrent enrollment/extension students, parents, and postdocs.



Services

The bulk of services provided by the Office consisted of clarifying campus policies and procedures, and coaching visitors in conflict resolution techniques and the language of non-defensive communication. All visitors were ultimately empowered to decide for themselves how to address their concerns and were encouraged to work toward resolutions that met their needs.

The Ombuds Office is geared toward fostering fair and impartial outcomes that reflect student success, make minimal use of administrative resources, reduce campus liability and exposure, and support an environment that furthers the university's mission, vision, and core values.

Beyond appointments with individual visitors, the Office performed 18 combined outreach events and trainings for over 400 individual undergraduate and graduate students, postdoctoral appointees, faculty, and staff.

Finally, it is important to note that since the Ombuds Office is, among other things, an *informal* resource, it therefore cannot and will not compel any party to use its services. Visitors should solicit its services voluntarily.

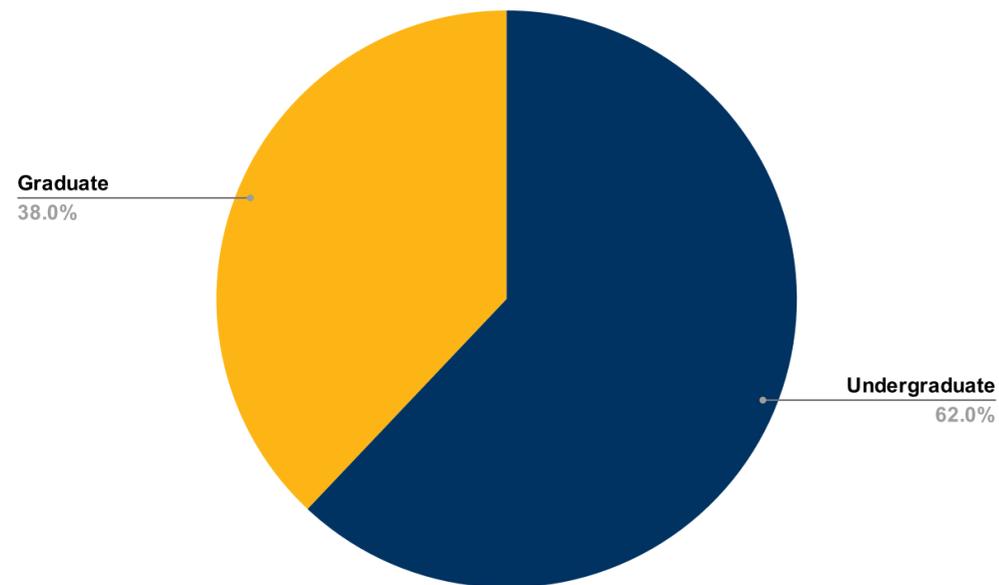
Student Visitors

Undergraduate and graduate students comprised nearly 75% of the Ombuds Office's total number of visitors. This number is historically on par with the Office's ten year average of nearly 77% of its visitors being students.

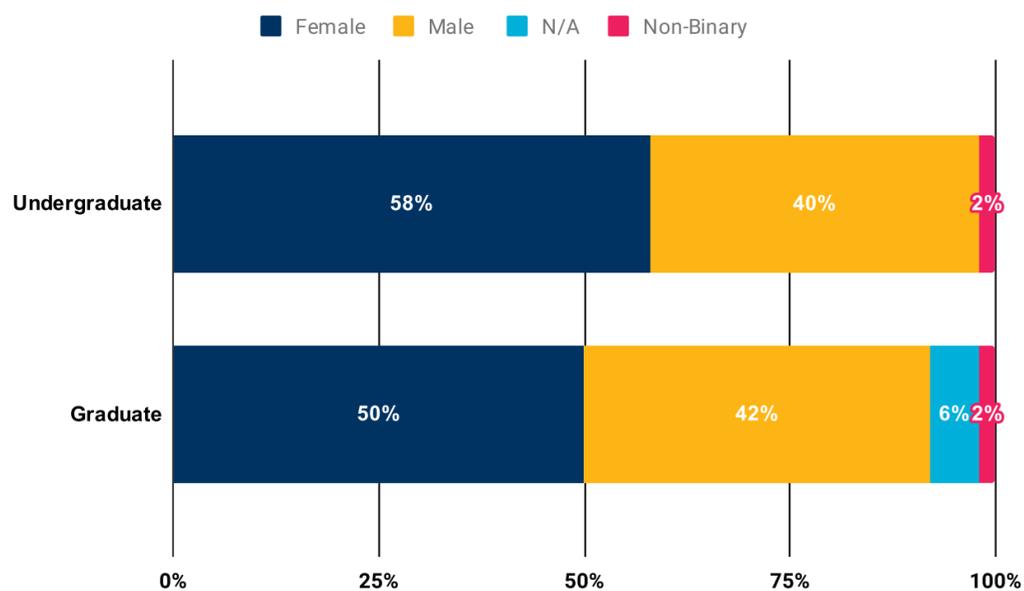
All visitors were given the option to voluntarily disclose their demographic information and were informed their responses would not be connected to their individual cases. Demographic data is only requested of student and postdoc visitors, and not of secondary parties wishing to consult on student and/or postdoc-related matters.

Campus-Wide numbers were taken from Fall 2019 reports published by the Graduate Division and the Office of Planning and Analysis.

Student Visitors Served



Student Visitors by Gender



Student Visitors by Race

	Undergraduate Students			Graduate Students		
	18-19	19-20	Campus-Wide	18-19	19-20	Campus-Wide
Asian/Asian American	26%	27%	40%	15%	20%	18%
Black/African American	8%	11%	3%	4%	7%	4%
Chicanx/Latinx	12%	18%	16%	4%	13%	8%
Native American/Alaska Native	0%	2%	<1%	0%	0%	1%
Pacific Islander	0%	3%	<1%	0%	0%	<1%
South Asian/Southwest Asian/North African	N/A	22%	N/A	N/A	5%	N/A
White/Caucasian	21%	35%	24%	49%	57%	33%
Other	12%	10%	12%	6%	3%	N/A
Declined to State/Unknown	30%	4%	4%	30%	15%	36%

*26% of undergraduate student visitors identified more than one race/ethnicity/national origin
 *9% of graduate student visitors identified more than one race/ethnicity/national origin
 * Campus numbers are based on Fall 2019 reports published by the Grad Division and OPA

Notably, the Ombuds Office had an improved response rate of the racial demographic information of its student visitors, both in raw response numbers and specificity. The Office posits two reasons to explain this development.

First, regarding the increased number of responses, visitors with phone appointments were more consistently asked for their racial identities. In previous years, it was standard procedure that only visitors with in-person appointments were asked for this information. This practice, instituted at the beginning of the reporting year, was especially vital to Office data collection efforts when in-person appointments were no longer possible after the institution moved to remote instruction in mid-March.

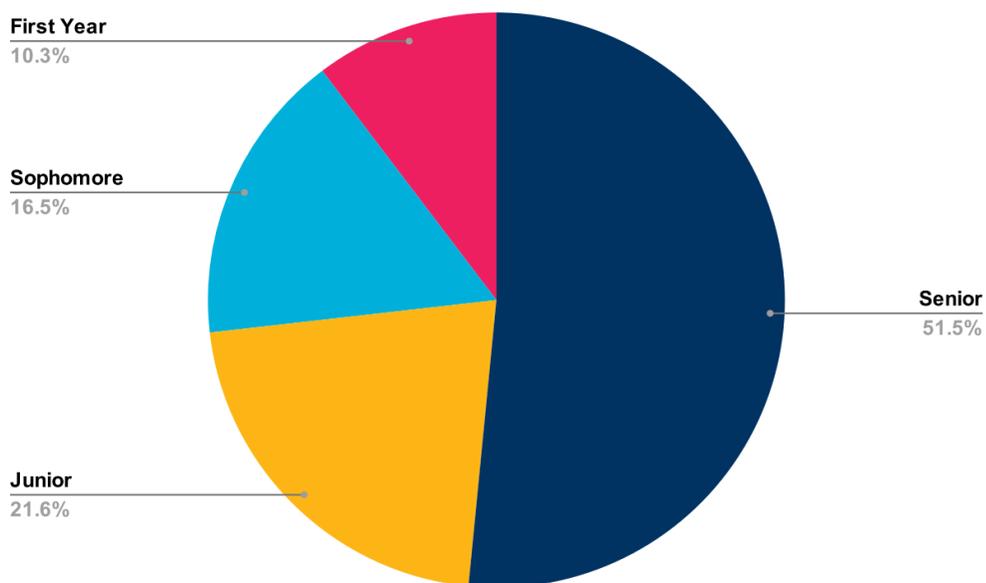
Second, this was the first year that the Ombuds Office offered visitors the option to identify as *South Asian/Southwest Asian/North African*. This racial category was introduced in response to a significant and steady number of visitors in previous years listing racial subgroups within this larger racial category. The Office believes its inclusion: (1) had a noticeable impact on the decrease in the number of *Decline to State/Unknown* and *Other* responses; and (2) has counteracted the historical disparity in *Asian/Asian American* visitors with the broader campus numbers in its prior annual reports.

Other Demographics	Undergraduate Students		Graduate Students	
	2018-19	2019-20	2018-19	2019-20
Disability	29%	22%	22%	15%
First Generation	12%	24%	20%	10%
International	18%	14%	9%	12%
Non-California Resident	42%	19%	58%	10%
Transfer	22%	31%	0%	0%

Undergraduate Student Visitors

Since its first annual report in 2008-09, the most common type of Office visitors have been undergraduate students. In this reporting year they represented nearly 47% of *all* visitors and 62% of all *student* visitors. This pattern is a reflection of the broader campus numbers as undergraduate students outnumbered graduate students by nearly three-to-one in 2019-20, and have historically done so by more than a two-to-one ratio.

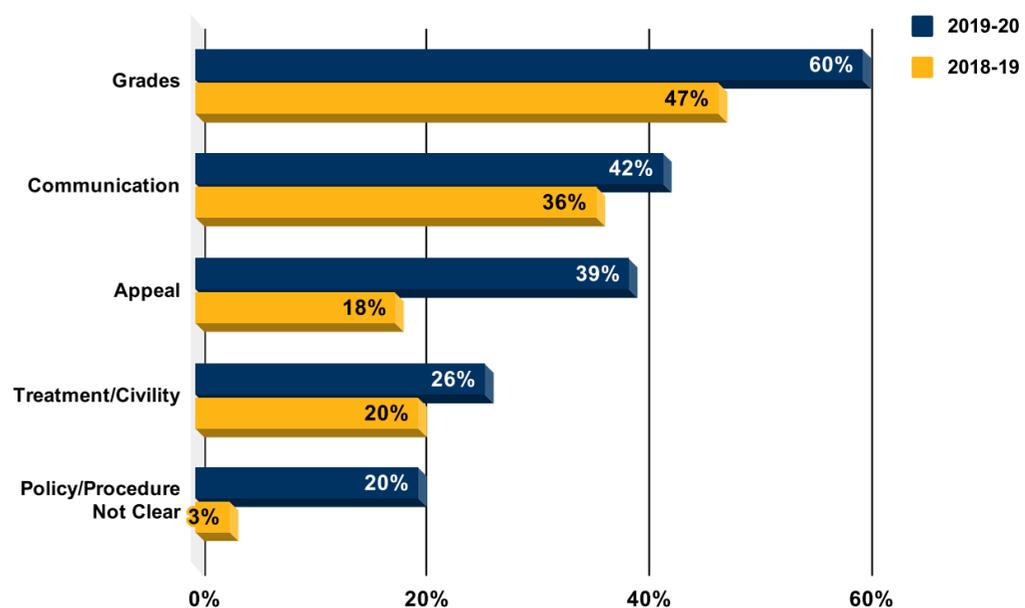
Undergraduate Student Visitors Served



Seniors, for the ninth time in the last ten years, were the most frequent type of undergraduate student visitor. The Ombuds Office believes this regularity exists for two primary reasons: (1) this population is more likely to be aware of and willing to use campus resources, including this Office, on account of their familiarity with and tenure at the university; and (2) with the aim of submitting competitive applications to graduate schools, they are more likely to be concerned with grades and campus appeal procedures - historically two of the most common concerns of undergraduate students.

The leading concern brought by undergraduate student visitors for the fourth consecutive year was grades. Because visitors may cite more than one issue in an individual case, it was common for cases involving grades to include other areas of concern, including: communication with an instructor, perceptions of mistreatment, and a lack of understanding or clarity of the formal grade appeal process.

Top 5 Undergraduate Student Concerns



It follows that if some of the most frequent concerns of undergraduate students are grades and campus appeal procedures, then faculty should often be given as a secondary party. This logic held true as undergraduate students listed a faculty member as the other party involved in their cases 50% of the time. This marked the tenth time in the last twelve years that faculty were the most common secondary party in undergraduate cases.

Undergraduate Student Parties Involved

	2018-19	2019-20
Faculty	45%	50%
Department	15%	17%
Student	15%	16%
Policy	12%	8%
Graduate Student Instructor	3%	6%
Staff	9%	2%
Parents	0%	1%
*1% of undergraduate visitors identified more than one party		

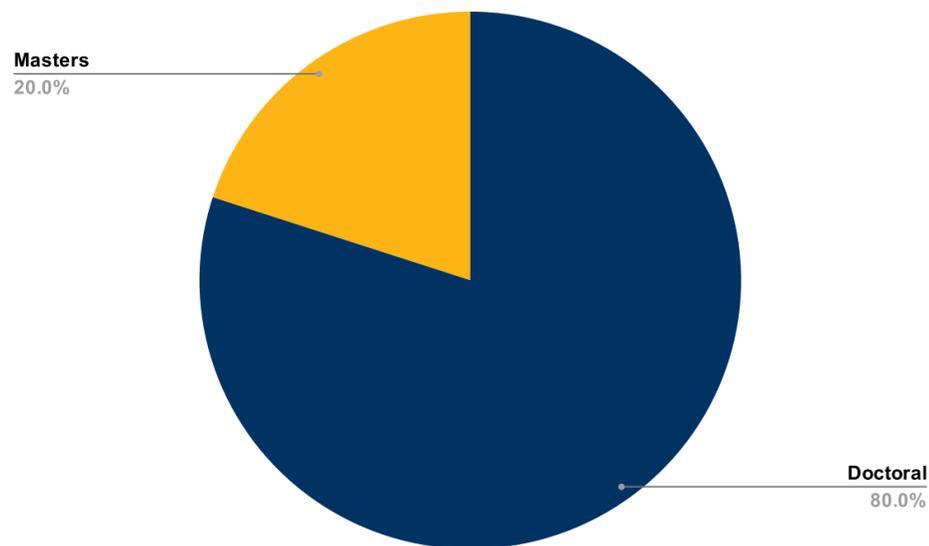
41%
Cases Required
Follow-up

7%
Cases with Facilitated
Resolution

Graduate Student Visitors

Just over 28% of *all* visitors and 38% of all *student* visitors to the Ombuds Office were graduate students. Both numbers represent a decrease from the previous reporting year and are the lowest since the 2011-12 reporting year. Beginning with the Office's first published report in 2008-09, graduate visitors have, on average, accounted for 32% of *all* visitors and 42% of all *student* visitors.

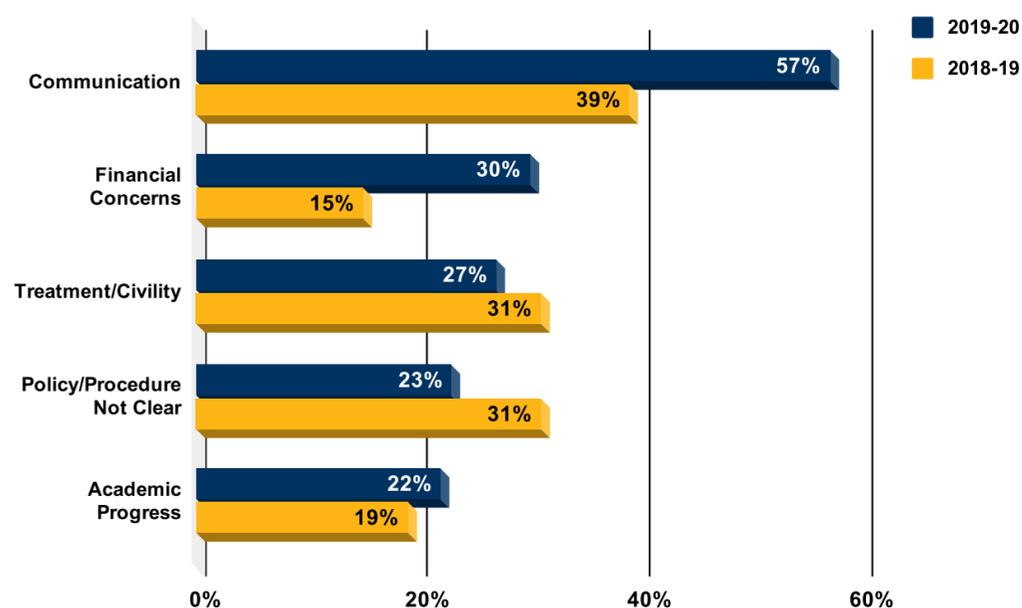
Graduate Student Visitors Served



Every year since 2008-09, doctoral students have been the most frequent type of graduate student visitor. In fact, doctoral students have outnumbered masters students every year by at least a three-to-one margin, and some years, including 2019-20, by a four-to-one margin. This has been the case despite the masters student population regularly outnumbering doctoral students by 1,000 or more in overall campus numbers.

There are a few possibilities this Office cites for why this norm exists. First, doctoral students generally have longer degree programs, and similar to undergraduate student seniors, are thus more likely to utilize the Ombuds Office because of their extended tenure on campus and greater likelihood of familiarity with campus resources. Another possibility may be related to the types of concerns commonly given by graduate student visitors. Namely, communication and treatment/civility. If doctoral students are more likely to be on campus for longer periods of time, then they would also be more likely than their masters student counterparts to address these issues with individuals with whom they have longstanding relationships.

Top 5 Graduate Student Concerns



Graduate student cases are often more complex because they can involve, as stated before, longstanding relationships. This includes relationships with advisors, chairs, departments, and dissertation committees. As a result, compared to undergraduate student cases, graduate student cases are more than twice as likely to result in some form of facilitated resolution (e.g., mediation).

Graduate Student Parties Involved

	2018-19	2019-20
Department	20%	48%
Faculty	58%	27%
Student	14%	15%
Postdoctoral Appointee	0%	3%
Policy	5%	2%
Staff	5%	2%
*5% of graduate visitors did not identify any other party		
*2% of graduate visitors identified more than one party		

42%
Cases Required
Follow-up

18%
Cases with Facilitated
Resolution

Other Visitors

Any visitors who were *not* current, degree-seeking students at the time of their visits were classified as *Other* visitors. These visitors represented just over a quarter (25.2%) of all visitors to the Ombuds Office this reporting year. This number, while up from the previous reporting year (18%), is marginally higher than the Office's historical average (24%).

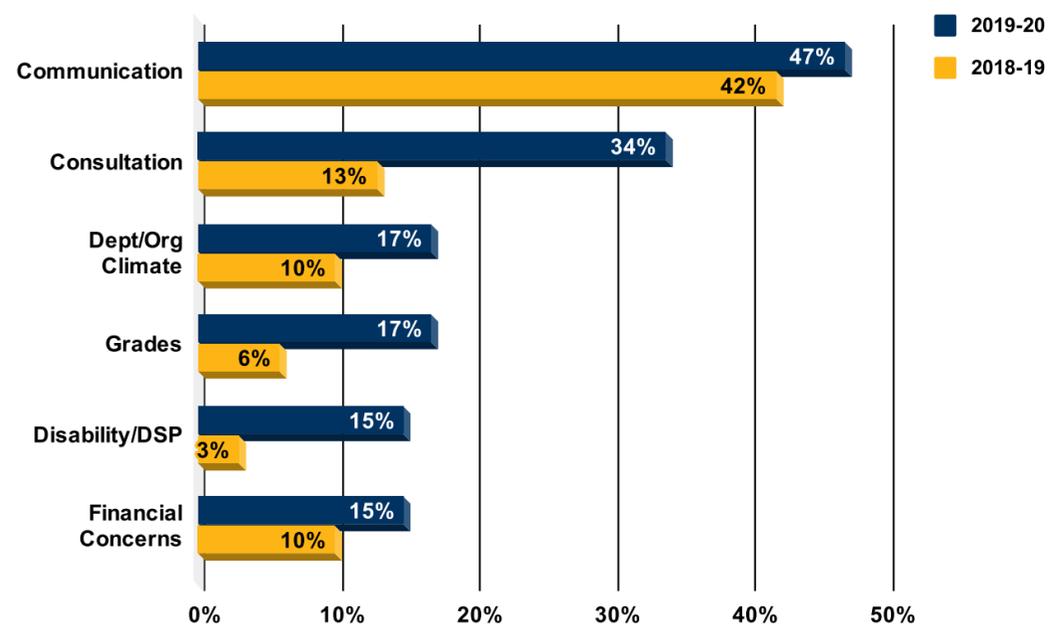
Other Visitors Served

	2019-20
Alumni (degree earning)	21%
Faculty	19%
Staff	17%
Concurrent Enrollment/Extension	11%
Postdoctoral Appointee	11%
Alumni (non-degree earning)	8%
Parent	6%
International Student	2%
N/A	2%
Non-Affiliate	2%
Sibling	2%

The nature and extent of assistance the Office offers to members of this population varies depending on an individual visitor's identity. Regardless of identity, all concerns must stem from a future, current, or past student or postdoc and their relationships with the university.

A significant amount of the work done with these visitors are consultations with faculty and staff, who represent a combined 36% of *other* visitors and 9% of *all* visitors. Consultations can be as brief as explaining the breadth of services the Office can offer to something more time-consuming like providing guidance in the development of policy/procedure. The bulk of work with faculty and staff, though, is in dealing with complex student issues. These include issues related to academic progress, department/organization climate, disability accommodations, intellectual property, and mentorship. Across all these is the common thread of communication, which is captured in it being one of the most common concerns raised by faculty and staff (68.4%).

Top 5 Concerns of Other Visitors



Parties Involved for Other Visitors

	2019-20
Student	40%
Department	28%
Faculty	21%
Policy	5%
Staff	4%
N/A	2%

Services for Other Visitors

	2018-19	2019-20
Clarifying Policy/Procedure	47%	55%
Coaching	63%	46%
Referral	14%	18%
Consultation	2%	10%
Shuttle Diplomacy	10%	7%
Mediation	2%	1%
*33% of visitors were provided more than one type of service		

Recommendations

The Ombuds Office makes recommendations based primarily on the concerns brought forth by visitors during the previous reporting year. While not all concerns raised by visitors are symptoms of harmful university policies, procedures, and/or culture that need correction, these concerns can highlight areas deserving of attention from university leadership when making policy decisions. The following recommendations provide options to examine for potentially improving the experiences of the student and postdoc populations.

- **Improve transparency with students regarding rights to file grade appeals and dispute allegations of academic misconduct.**

- Many visitors expressed unfamiliarity (some complete ignorance) with both the grade appeal policy and the academic misconduct process. While the responsibility of being aware of and understanding these ultimately lies with students, the continued high rate of inquiries about each suggest more can be done to preemptively educate. The Office does not expect most faculty or administrators to have working knowledge of how each operate, however, more transparency (e.g., inclusion of links to each on syllabi) could go a long way in reinforcing the good-faith relationship between students and the university.

- **Provide graduate students and postdocs greater access to, and opportunities for, effective faculty mentorship.**

- Graduate students and postdocs regularly report frustrations in developing supportive relationships with faculty. This manifests in inconsistent and unreliable communication patterns, and uncertainties with how to convey their needs. Relationships with faculty are one of the key elements that distinguish the graduate and postdoc experiences from undergraduate programs, and are a critical early step in achieving academic success. The Office encourages academic departments to place greater emphasis on developing faculty mentors and fostering these relationships.

- **Take proactive measures to anticipate difficulties associated with remote instruction and mandatory social distancing practices during the 2020-21 academic year and beyond.**

- The COVID-19 pandemic has fundamentally altered all aspects of the university experience. As a result, students and postdocs are under increased stress and in need of unprecedented institutional patience and support. In light of these new challenges, the Ombuds Office offers the following proactive measures to campus administrators and faculty for consideration:
 - Bolster basic needs and mental health services. Many students are at risk to lose wages from on- or off-campus jobs. As a result, it's foreseeable that students may experience increased difficulty addressing rising food, housing, and tuition costs. Further, stretched resources could also lead students to experience higher rates of anxiety, depression, and other mental health disorders as they adjust to the changing educational landscape.
 - Make study groups, tutoring, and office hours more virtually accessible. In normal circumstances, students can reasonably utilize these resources for academic assistance. Now, with many students learning in isolation, virtual access to instructors, peers, and tutors is more essential than ever to ensure students are sufficiently supported in their coursework.
 - Prioritize the restructuring of courses and teaching practices to align with online formats and the virtual learning environment. With most students learning remotely - many for the first time - course structures and teaching methods may need adaptation to adequately complement this new normal. This might include recording lectures, and providing faculty the means to effectively and efficiently redesign their courses for virtual delivery.
 - Reevaluate the grounds for and intensity of reporting cases of academic dishonesty. In light of students adjusting to changes in instruction and learning, procedures for identifying and reporting academic misconduct should reflect and accommodate this new, challenging reality.