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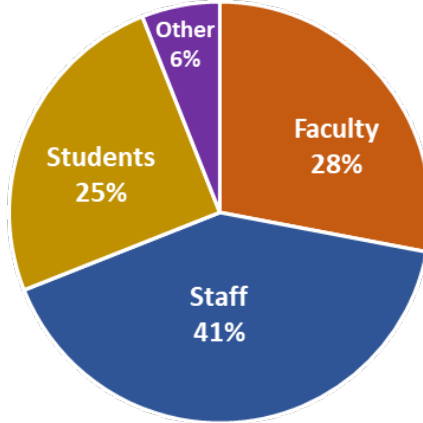
No problem is too big or too small. Let's talk!

IOWA | Office of the Ombudsperson

ANNUAL REPORT 2020-2021

The Ombuds Office serves the UI community by providing **confidential, neutral, informal, and independent** problem solving and conflict resolution. This year **646** visitors were assisted.

TYPES OF VISITORS

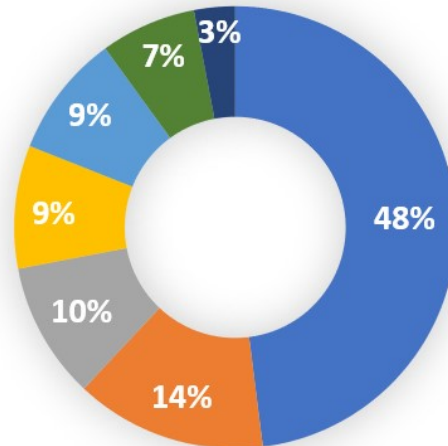


- UI staff were again the largest group served.
- Faculty represented 28% of visitors, an increase from 15% in 2015.

Satisfied Visitors 86%

Number of Consultations from Department Administrators and Human Resources Staff: 79

VISITOR CONCERNS



- Evaluative Relationships
- Peer Relationships
- Career/Academic Progression
- Services/Administration
- Safety/Health/Environment
- Policy Violations
- Other

*** Nearly one in four (24%) visitors indicated disrespectful behavior was a concern. This is a decrease from 30% in 2019-20.**

CASES WITH A PERCEIVED RISK TO CAMPUS: 71%

Breakdown of cases with a perceived risk (cases may have multiple perceived risks):

Loss of Productivity.....	42%	Safety.....	5%
Policy Violations.....	18%	Negative Publicity....	3%
Turnover.....	15%	Litigation.....	2%
Grievance.....	15%		



HIGHLIGHTS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

It has been another challenging year at the University of Iowa, with administrative changes, financial losses, DEI issues, and, of course, the pandemic. We want to highlight three issues: departmental responses to situations involving diversity, equity and inclusion concerns, navigating student accommodations, and the pandemic's contribution to conflict on campus.

COVID

We continue to see the pandemic causing new conflicts and exacerbating existing conflicts. We recognize the constraints on actions by the University and also are very concerned by the increasing distress among faculty, students and staff about the campus public health situation. We ask for kindness, patience, and flexibility as we all navigate through these conflicts, as well as recognition of and respect for multiple perspectives.

Department Responses to Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Issues

Over the last year, there have been a number of examples across campus of units facing difficult situations involving diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) concerns. We believe that the Black Lives Matter movement, increasing awareness of racism, and political divisiveness have brought more DEI concerns to light. Obviously, these are very complicated situations with high stakes, given the seriousness of the concerns, the significant impact on the individuals involved, strong emotional responses on all sides, the potential for media attention, and possible Board of Regents and/or Iowa Legislature involvement.

Administrators who have faced these very difficult situations have worked hard to navigate them effectively. Despite the best of intentions, we do see some frequent errors. The most common error is delaying action, possibly with the hope that situations will resolve themselves. We want to remind everyone that inaction carries its own risks. We also see poor, delayed, or no communication with stakeholders, and failure to reach out for expert help across campus in developing and implementing the best possible approach. We strongly recommend being alert to possible DEI components in difficult situations and quickly convening a meeting of key UI resources to develop a thoughtful plan for action, including communication and possible facilitated discussions. We also recommend DEI training for units and orgs, which can help to create a climate where DEI issues can be discussed productively.

Often these situations involve behaviors that do not rise to the level of policy violations and/or are protected by the First Amendment. Without a policy violation, no formal investigation into the situation can take place. However, even without definitive answers about what happened and the ability to hold people accountable, we believe an emphasis on healing for all involved, especially people of color and other marginalized groups, is extremely important. We also think it is reasonable to talk with people about the fact that behaviors that may not violate UI policies or state or federal laws still may have negative impacts on others in the UI community as well as the health of the community as a whole.

HIGHLIGHTS AND RECOMMENDATIONS, continued

Managing Student Academic Accommodations

We have seen a number of cases this year involving undergraduate and graduate students who are very concerned about receiving appropriate academic accommodations for disabilities. Understandably, it can be difficult for students to take steps to acknowledge any disabilities, get appropriate documentation, work with Student Disability Services (SDS) and/or their respective colleges, and communicate with faculty members, and we have seen increased emotional distress by students involved in this process. Faculty members, in turn, have the responsibility to respond positively and supportively to student requests for accommodations but may not have the training and experience to do so effectively. Students and faculty members do not always feel that they are getting enough support as they engage in the academic accommodations process. Students can be frustrated and impatient, and faculty members can be perceived as dismissive of student needs. Communication on all sides can be uneven and misinterpreted. And of course the entire process is exacerbated by the stress of the pandemic.

We recommend increased training for faculty in how to have positive conversations with students about academic accommodations, and increased communication about expectations for students and faculty. We also strongly recommend a more proactive approach to student academic accommodations including increased collaboration among SDS and other campus offices, increased awareness of diversity in learning, and greater emphasis on universal design.

OMBUDSPERSON STAFF

We are delighted to welcome Meenakshi Gigi Durham as the new faculty University Ombudsperson. Gigi is a Professor in the School of Journalism and Mass Communication with a joint appointment in Gender, Women's and Sexuality Studies. She is a distinguished scholar and teacher, has served in a number of administrative roles on campus, and is an active member of the University of Iowa community. She brings a wealth of experience as a faculty member, former journalist, and woman of color to enrich our office and help us provide the best possible services to campus.



Cynthia Joyce, MPPM, MES, has been the staff University Ombudsperson since 2005 and has been a mediator since 1990.
cynthia-joyce@uiowa.edu



Meenakshi Gigi Durham, PhD, was appointed as the half-time faculty University Ombudsperson in July 2021. She is a Professor and CLAS Collegiate Scholar in Journalism and Mass Communication with a joint appointment in Gender, Women's & Sexuality Studies.
gigi-durham@uiowa.edu



Jennifer Lynch, MS, MSEd, joined the office as an Associate Ombudsperson in November 2020. She is an experienced conflict trainer and has a joint appointment as a program director in the Center for Diversity and Enrichment.
jennifer-a-lynch@uiowa.edu



Nadia Sabbagh-Steinberg, LMSW, PhD, joined the office as an Associate Ombudsperson in January 2021. She is a Lecturer in the School of Social Work with 10 years of clinical practice experience.
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