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

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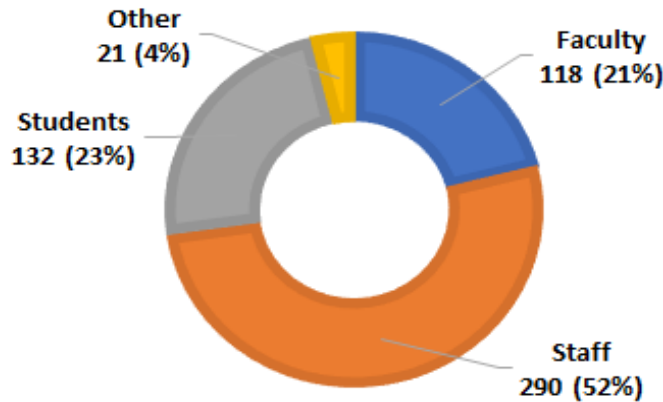
“The Office of the Ombudsperson is very open to offering new opportunities that I had never thought of”.
~Anonymous

IOWA | Office of the Ombudsperson

ANNUAL REPORT 2023-2024

The Ombuds Office serves the UI community by providing **confidential, impartial, informal, and independent** problem solving and conflict resolution services. This year, **561** new visitor appointments were conducted. It is important to note that that an increase or decrease in the number of contacts does not necessarily indicate growing or reduced concerns in the organization.

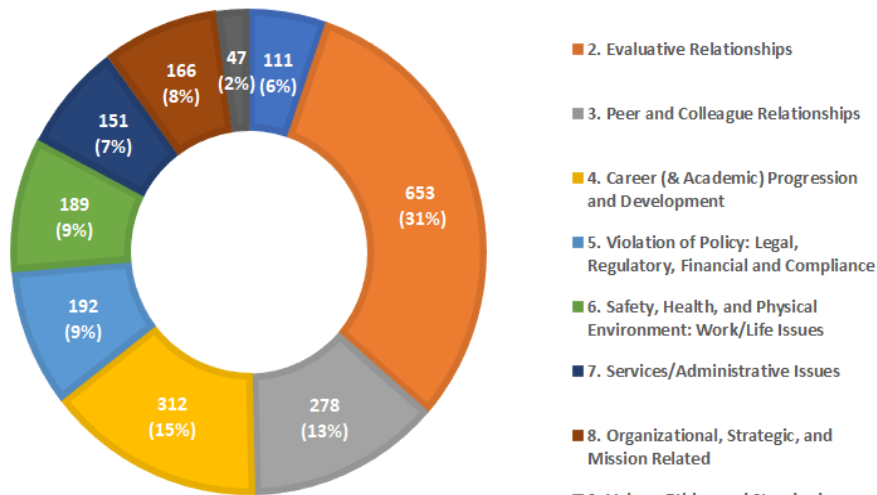
VISITOR TYPE



Professional & Scientific Staff

accounted for **46%** of the total visitors assisted this fiscal year. Of these **561** new visitor appointments, **38%** of visitors returned to the office to discuss the initial concern in a follow-up capacity resulting in **214** revisit appointments.

VISITOR CONCERNS

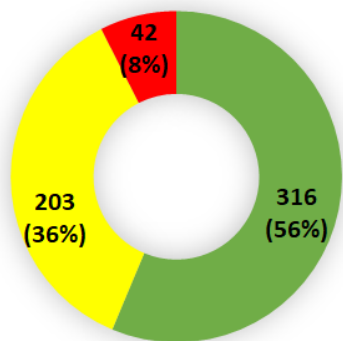


The top **five** sub concerns overall are:

- 1) **2m. Performance Appraisal/Grading (79)**- job/academic performance in a formal or informal evaluation.
- 2) **6i. Work Related Stress/Work-Life Balance (72)**-stress due to workload, workplace environment, traumatic incidents;challenges with balancing work demands and home life, anxiety
- 3) **1a. Compensation (67)**-rate of pay, salary amount, job salary classification/ level, raises, reimbursements
- 4) **2e. Communication (62)**- quality and/or quantity of communication in evaluative relationships
- 5) **2o. Supervisory Effectiveness (59)**- failure to address issues and/or manage the department/classroom

A total of **2,099** concerns were captured. This total reflects individual contacts to the office raising **multiple** concerns and a restriction of **four** allowable selections per visitor. It is important to note that the Office of the Ombudsperson tracks visitor concerns using an adapted version of the **IOA Uniform Reporting Categories**.

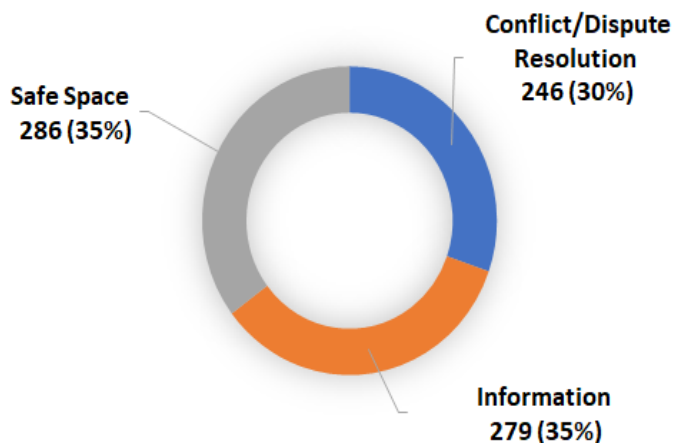
CASE COMPLEXITY & ANALYSIS



Green cases are fairly straightforward and mostly interpersonal conflicts involving fewer than four people. **Yellow** cases typically have more people involved with multiple issues and increasingly serious consequences. **Red** cases are highly complex with high stakes, often lasting several months or impacting multiple parts of the organization.

It is important to note that **Loss of productivity** is a **risk** that accounted for **34%** of the visitor appointments and is the **largest** perceived risk to campus. A visitor may have **multiple** perceived risks or **none** at all.

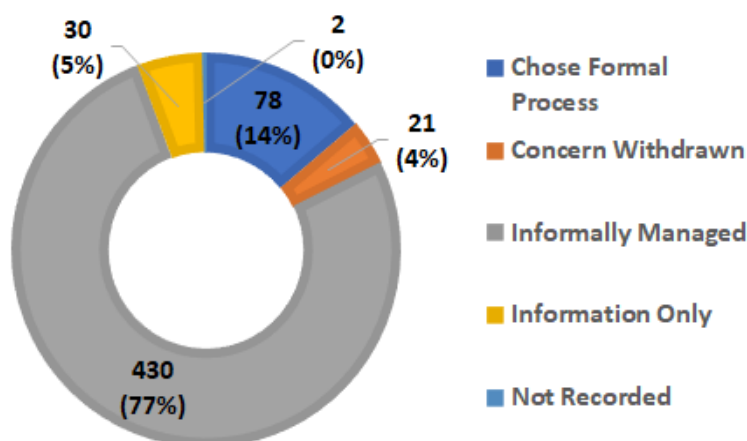
SERVICES PROVIDED



The top **Themes** captured by the Ombuds office are:

- 1) **Interpersonal Conflict-16%**
- 2) **Workplace Dynamics-13%**
- 3) **Personnel Review-8%**

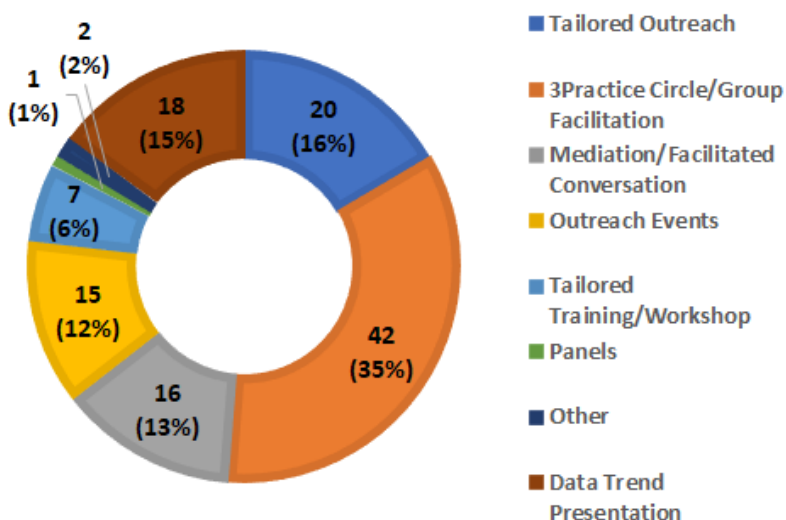
OUTCOMES



The top **Actions** by the Ombuds office consisted of:

- 1) **Consultation/Problem Solving-36%**
- 2) **Coaching-14%**
- 3) **Discuss Applicable Policies/Processes-13%**

ADDITIONAL SERVICES



SATISFACTION SURVEY

- **75%** of visitors who responded to the anonymous survey indicated they were **satisfied** with the service of the Office of the Ombudsperson.
- **78%** of visitors who responded to the anonymous survey **agreed** that they would contact the Office of the Ombudsperson for help if the need arose in the future.
- **81%** of visitors who responded to the anonymous survey **agreed** that they would refer others to the Office of the Ombudsperson for assistance.

"I am 100% sure I will need the Ombudsperson's office in the future, and I am 100% sure, having gotten acquainted with the office, that I would get the support I need." ~Anonymous

Ombudspersons reached approximately **2,998** individuals through the **121 Additional Services** conducted by the Office of the Ombudsperson.



HIGHLIGHTS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The primary concerns of visitors to the Office of the Ombudsperson were: 1) the process for determining merit raises for employees; and 2) disrespectful treatment and specific vulnerabilities based on visa/immigration status in performance appraisals and the work environment for international students, scholars, and staff. The observations and recommendations below were drawn from multiple discussions with visitors to the Office of the Ombudsperson during this reporting period. Our office does not conduct any formal investigations regarding these concerns and the recommendations are based on the limited information shared during visitor appointments.

Compensation

Faculty visitors to the Office of the Ombudsperson shared concerns about departmental processes for determining merit raises, which they perceived as resulting in some unfairly high or low raises. Visitors who received low merit raises indicated not feeling valued or evaluated fairly based on such factors as increased class sizes, expanded job responsibilities, and comparable records of scholarship, teaching, and service among colleagues. Some visitors had accepted a lower salary due to compression concerns (i.e., senior faculty compensation based on lower starting salaries in the past); shortly thereafter, new positions would be posted with higher salaries. Visitors described stipends being removed from contracts despite increases in workload, as well as previous experience not being considered for promotion and tenure, thus lengthening the tenure clock and deferring raises based on achieving tenure.

Staff visitors to the Office of the Ombudsperson shared concerns that organizational units were having difficulty communicating the rationale for compensation decisions, creating increased stress and conflict in the workplace. Visitors felt there are no consistent criteria or transparent review processes to determine salaries and/or raises, believing that favoritism is sometimes a factor. Many visitors believed their pay was inconsistent with that of other employees in the same/similar positions despite taking on additional duties and even doing their colleagues' work. Visitors shared that they are or have witnessed colleagues using counteroffers or transferring to a new position for higher pay to self-address salary variations between newer hires and current employees. They also indicated failure to fulfill promises of promotions and/or raises.

Recommendations: We propose (1) a review of the merit raise process for faculty, (2) additional compensation education options, and (3) collaboration between colleges/divisions and Compensation and Classification when staff compensation concerns arise. We recognize that the Compensation and Classification unit in University Human Resources provides educational opportunities for senior HR leaders, the HR community, and Staff Council on an annual and ad hoc basis.

HIGHLIGHTS AND RECOMMENDATIONS, CONT'D

Performance Appraisals, Work Environment, and Immigration/Visa Status

International visitors to the Office of the Ombudsperson—mostly postdoctoral scholars, graduate students, professional students, residents, and fellows—disclosed high levels of anxiety, stress, sleep loss, depression, medical problems, and inability to eat while dealing with workplace conflicts. They are afraid to report problems such as lack of mentoring, bullying, harassment, blaming, harsh criticism, shunning, patronization, being undermined/gossiped about, and unfair treatment due to status. They also described what they perceived as xenophobic and racist comments directed at them, criticism of their English proficiency despite having passed all required language tests, and feeling deliberately humiliated, believing they would be treated with more respect if they were American. They also communicated being assigned different tasks than their American peers, typically coinciding with a negative performance review that some viewed as retaliatory, thus interfering with their ability to graduate. As well, supervisors threatened defunding or visa revocation if their work did not meet expectations. Visitors shared their hesitation to address concerns directly to avoid upsetting their supervisors and principal investigators. Those who hold temporary nonimmigrant visas (typically J1 or H1B) appear to be in a particularly vulnerable position, fearing visa revocation and being deported if their employment were jeopardized, in turn disrupting or derailing their scholarly careers.

Staff members on temporary visas and/or those who identify as having an international background expressed similar concerns, as well as being micromanaged by supervisors, supervisors and/or principal investigators using derogatory racial terms against them, and being aggressively threatened during performance reviews. They expressed fear of standing up for themselves, perceiving that the consequences would be more serious compared to peers with U.S. citizenship. Visitors to the office expressed uncertainty over how much any escalated internal informal or formal process might mitigate this treatment, causing some to consider external resolution options.

Recommendations: For supervisors in an evaluative relationship with those who identify as international members of the campus community and/or who hold a temporary visa, we suggest they pay particular attention to the needs and situations of this vulnerable population. The University of Iowa's and external funding agencies' guidelines about hostile work environments should be made clear to all employees, especially those involved in the research enterprise. We suggest proactive coaching of principal investigators, faculty members, and staff supervisors as a reminder that all students' success is part of our strategic plan and to affirm that staff are valued on campus. Further, the university should continue to enforce funding agencies' hostile work environment guidelines and sanctions. The Office of the Ombudsperson can serve as an impartial resource to help address these concerns informally using our problem-solving and conflict resolution services.