



**Brown University Ombuds Office
Annual Report
Fiscal Year 2021**



University Ombuds Office

July 1, 2020 – June 30, 2021

Message from the University Ombuds

Dear Brown Community,

This past year has been a particularly challenging and noteworthy one, characterized by a continuous global pandemic, a racial reckoning, ongoing economic uncertainty, increasing political polarity, significant climate change, and more. Thus, even before taking into account the day-to-day typical workplace/academic conflicts in a diverse, dynamic, and multi-layered place like Brown, FY21 was a year teeming with conflict, stress, and uncertainty for individuals, teams, departments, and organizations nationwide and worldwide.

Not surprisingly, the constellation of unique factors cited above influenced the volume of cases and the types of concerns that visitors brought to the Ombuds Office this year. Regarding volume, the office saw the highest number of annual recorded cases – 334 – ever in its history. Meanwhile, alongside more typical concerns about workplace/academic policies, visitors across all roles reached out to talk with the Ombuds Office about many changing policies, procedures, practices and challenges. These discussions regarded a wide variety of topics, including mask wearing, housing, onsite “essential” workers, online working or learning, testing, and safety, more generally. So, too, as teams pivoted and pivoted again to adjust to changing work and learning conditions and needs, the Ombuds Office heard a lot from visitors about stress, increased workload, the intensifying challenge of juggling work-life, especially for caregivers, and the additional stressor of a hiring freeze. Moreover, with considerable in-person work interrupted, faculty and student visitors raised issues regarding the impact of the pandemic on their work and research progress, as well as on their degree and tenure timing and requirements. Simultaneously, the killing of George Floyd and other Black and brown individuals, the resulting activism and growth in the Black Lives Matter movement, and the rise in violence against Asian Americans, also impacted visitor concerns; numerous individuals as well as groups raised issues regarding racism, bias, and/or other inequities.

Unrelated to the pandemic, but coinciding with its start, the Ombuds Office underwent a substantial transition in March 2020; the former ombuds of eight years, Ruthy Kohorn Rosenberg, departed Brown, and I, Julie Weber, began working in the ombuds role. Ms. Rosenberg spent considerable time and care over the phone over multiple days introducing me to the office and Brown, and for this, I am grateful.

Furthermore, due to the pandemic, the Ombuds Office worked fully virtually to provide conflict resolutions services online from March 18, 2020, through early September 2021. Although the virtual platform was not the traditional primary means of providing ombuds’ services, the medium worked surprisingly well from the perspective of many visitors, as well as from that of the Ombuds Office. In light of this, the Ombuds Office plans to provide virtual services in perpetuity, in addition to in-person services, even after the pandemic subsides.

Lastly, after 18 months of service, I want to thank you very much for the opportunity to serve the Brown University community as its ombuds. From the start, I have been both aware and appreciative of the strong community support and respect that the University has for the work of the Ombuds Office, led by President Christina H. Paxson and Chief of Staff to the President Marguerite Joutz. Moreover, I am grateful for my many (mostly online) interactions over the past year and half with staff, faculty, and students, that have deepened my understanding of Brown and its rich and varied organizational cultures. It is an honor and pleasure to work together to find productive ways to address and manage conflict, as well as create more inclusive and equitable environments. I greatly look forward to continuing this important work with you.

Yours in conflict and resolution,

Julie Weber, J.D.

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Background and mission of the University Ombuds Office

Since 2012, the Brown University Ombuds Office has provided a safe, off-the-record, and confidential place where Brown University faculty, staff, graduate students, medical students, and postdoctoral scholars can voluntarily seek free support in constructively managing their concerns or conflicts. These concerns and conflicts can be around any matter arising out of, or affecting, one's work, study, or life at the University.

The University Ombuds Office provides the following services:

- Listening and helping visitors¹ to clarify underlying interests
- Providing visitors with information and exploring options for resolving conflict or surfacing issues of concern
- Identifying resources within and outside of the University to share with visitors
- Facilitating conversations and/or mediating disputes between members of the served community to resolve issues, as appropriate and agreed upon by all involved parties
- Coaching and providing conflict analysis
- Collecting data on emerging trends and patterns while safeguarding visitor anonymity and confidentiality
- Training on conflict management topics for both small and large groups
- Providing upward feedback to the University's senior administration, protecting the anonymity of visitors and the confidentiality of communications with them
- Proposing recommendations for systemic and organizational change based on data retrieved
- Utilizing collected data to create annual reports, like this one, to share non-identifying visitor information and trends

In regularly promoting constructive conflict management, the University Ombuds Office is focused on its mission: to help foster and support a respectful, ethical, and equitable working, learning, and living environment for the diverse members of the Brown community.

Standards of Practice

The Brown University Ombuds operates in accordance with the International Ombudsman Association (IOA) Code of Ethics², including:



Confidentiality: The Ombuds Office holds the identity and all communications with those seeking assistance in strict confidence unless there is an imminent risk of serious harm or the office is expressly required by law to make disclosure (e.g., to report child abuse).

Impartiality: The Ombuds Office, as a designated neutral, is

unaligned and impartial, enabling it to hold space for each member of the served community, regardless of context.

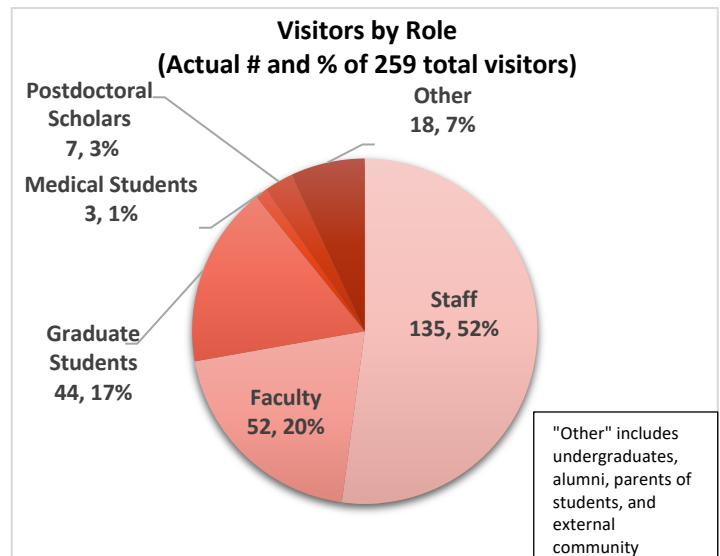
Independence: The Ombuds Office is independent in structure, function, and appearance to the highest degree possible within the organization.

Informality: The Ombuds Office is not authorized to make decisions or policy, investigate, arbitrate, judge, discipline, award, or in any other way participate in any formal investigation or formal process within the University concerning University matters.

The University Ombuds Office is not affiliated with any compliance function and does NOT serve as an agent of notice.

Office Activity - Visitors

Between July 1, 2020, through June 30, 2021 (Fiscal Year 2021), **259** visitors met with the University Ombuds for consultations. Staff comprised the largest group of visitors, while faculty was the second largest group of visitors during this time. Meanwhile, graduate students comprised the third largest group of visitors.



Of the 259 total visitors, 32 of them (12%) returned to the ombuds office with an additional 1 – 4 new and separate matters, increasing the number of actual cases by 75 (Total cases = 259 + 75 = **334**). This is the **highest number of cases recorded per year since the office's inception**.

¹ Individuals seeking assistance from the ombuds are referred to as "visitors."

² The International Ombudsman Association's (IOA) Standards of Practice are

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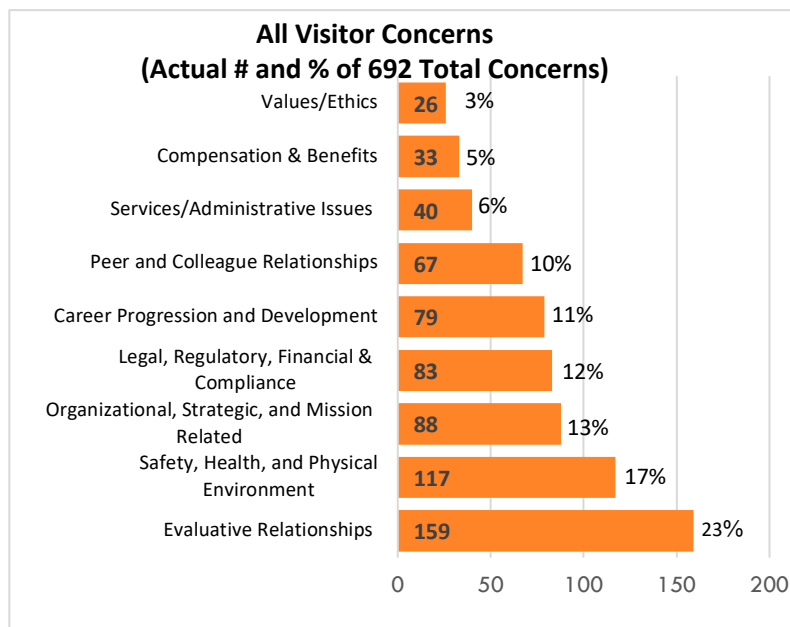
July 1, 2020 – June 30, 2021

Visitor Concerns – IOA Uniform Reporting Categories

To promote uniformity and protect anonymity, visitor concerns are categorized into the nine uniform reporting categories articulated by the IOA.³ Visitors often express concerns related to more than one category.

Office Activity - Concerns

Visitors shared **692** total concerns this past year with the Ombuds Office, a breakdown of which is reflected in the chart below:



Across all visitors, the top three most prevalent visitor concern categories (“Top Three 2021 Concerns”), in order of pervasiveness, were:

- **Evaluative Relationships** (issues arising from supervisor/supervisee, advisor/advisee, faculty-student relationships)
- **Safety, Health, and Physical Environment** (questions, concerns, or inquiries about safety, health and infrastructure-related issues)
- **Organizational, Strategic, and Mission Related** (issues arising from whole or part of the organization, including leadership/management practices/qualities and climate)

These are the same top three concern categories that were noted in the 2020 six-month report, found [here](#).

Common Subcategories

The predominant subcategories that were discussed as related to the top concern categories across all visitors were:

- **Communication** (quality and/or quantity of communication);
- **Respect/Treatment** (demonstrations of inappropriate regard for people, not listening, rudeness, etc.);
- **Departmental Climate** (prevailing behaviors, norms, or attitudes within a department for which supervisors have responsibility);
- **Work-Related Stress and Work-Life Balance** (Post-Traumatic Stress, Critical Incident Response, internal/external stress, e.g. divorce, shooting, caring for sick, injured);
- **Assignments/Scheduling** (appropriateness or fairness of tasks, expected volume of work);
- **Leadership/Management** (quality/capacity of management and/or management/leadership decisions, suggested training, reassignments and reorganizations); and
- **Organizational Climate** (issues related to organizational morale and/or capacity for functioning).

26% of the visitors (42/159) who discussed evaluative relationships requested help in dealing with issues relating to individuals *they supervise, teach, advise, or mentor*. The other **74%** of these visitors (117/159) were requesting support in addressing issues with individuals *to whom they report or by whom they are being evaluated*.

³ These IOA categories are the following: (1) Compensation and Benefits; (2) Evaluative Relationships; (3) Peer and Colleague Relationships; (4) Career Progression and Development; (5) Legal, Regulatory, Financial, and Compliance; (6) Safety, Health, and Physical Environment; (7) Services/Administrative Issues; (8)

Organizational, Strategic, and Mission Related; and (9) Values, Ethics, and Standards. Moreover, there are numerous subcategories associated with each category.

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**All Visitors - Top Subcategories
(Actual # and % of 259 Total Visitors)**



**IOA Uniform Reporting Guidelines
Categories/Subcategories Related to
Diversity, Bias, and Equitable Treatment**

Category	Subcategory	Actual # of Visitors
Evaluative Relationships	1. Diversity-Related (comments or behaviors perceived to be insensitive, offensive, or intolerant on the basis of an identity-related difference such as race, gender, nationality, sexual orientation)	73
	2. Equity of Treatment (favoritism, one or more individuals receive preferential treatment)	80
Legal, Regulatory, Financial, and Compliance	1. Harassment	36
	2. Discrimination	20
Peer and Colleague Relationships	Diversity-Related	35

Diversity, Bias, and Equitable Treatment

In the IOA Uniform Reporting Categories, there are three main categories and five subcategories that focus directly on diversity, bias, and equitable treatment. This year, **40%** of total visitors (103/259) discussed at least one of these categories/subcategories with the Ombuds Office, including perceptions of unfair/inappropriate treatment or exclusion based on issues of race, ethnicity, gender, gender identity/expression, age, and disability. Staff, faculty, and students of all identities raised these kinds of concerns in the context of individual relationships as well as larger group dynamics. Anti-Black racism and sexism were widely discussed.

Common Themes/Perceptions Shared by Visitors

- Burnout/stress and increase in mental and physical health needs
- Identity/belonging challenges and bias/racism/sexism
- Abrasive and/or conflict-averse leaders/managers/advisors who are negatively impacting individuals and teams
- Difficult and frayed departmental/team/group dynamics and communication
- Ineffective communication, displacement, and/or lack of transparency concerning change management