



Brown University Ombuds Office

Special Report: March 18, 2020 – September 30, 2020

Brown University Ombuds Office Overview

Since 2013, the Brown University Ombuds Office has provided a safe, confidential, and off-the-record place for staff, faculty, graduate students, medical students, and postdoctoral scholars to bring concerns or conflicts related to life, work, or study at Brown. The Ombuds Office provides informal conflict management, referral, and problem-solving services, enabling users of the service to better understand conflict situations and find effective ways to resolve or manage their conflicts and concerns. Additionally, the Ombuds Office helps to promote ethical conduct and values as well as support positive systemic change community-wide.

Services include:

- Listening and helping to clarify underlying interests
- Providing information and exploring options for moving forward
- Referring to resources within and outside of Brown
- Facilitating discussions and/or mediating disputes to resolve issues, as appropriate
- Coaching and providing conflict analysis
- Collecting data on emerging trends and patterns while safeguarding anonymity
- Training on conflict management topics
- Utilizing data to create annual reports,¹ including proposing annual recommendations for systemic and organizational change

Standards of Practice

The Ombuds Office operates in accordance with the International Ombudsman Association (IOA) Standards of Practice,² including:



Confidentiality: The Ombuds Office holds all communications with those seeking assistance in strict confidence with few exceptions. The Ombuds Office may disclose communications if given permission to do so by the information giver, or if the situation has been determined by the Ombuds Office to present “an imminent risk of serious harm.” In rare cases, the Ombuds Office may be compelled by law to disclose information.

Impartiality: The Ombuds Office, as a designated neutral

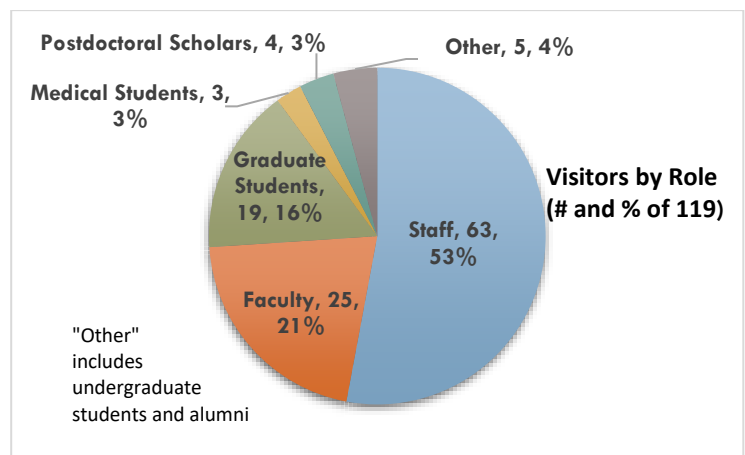
party, is unaligned and impartial. The Ombuds Office does not take sides on behalf of any individual, cause, or dispute, and will seek to address concerns raised by each visitor.

Independence: The Ombuds Office is independent in structure, function, and appearance to the highest degree possible within the organization. The Ombuds Office reports directly to the President in a manner that is independent of traditional organizational structure.

Informality: The Ombuds Office works informally; the Ombuds Office does not adjudicate, investigate, or make decisions related to concerns brought to their attention. The Ombuds Office is not authorized to accept legal notice of claims on behalf of the University.

Office Activity - Visitors

During this Special Report period, 119 visitors³ met with the University Ombuds for consultations. Staff represented the largest group of visitors, while faculty were the second largest group of visitors during this time. Meanwhile, graduate students comprised the third largest group of visitors.



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.⁴ Visitors often express concerns related to more than one category.

¹ The annual report was not completed for 2019-20, where the former ombuds departed the University for a new opportunity in March 2020. This Special Report captures Ombuds Office activity from March 18, 2020, the date on which the new University Ombuds began working and during the week in which Brown University switched largely to remote working due to the COVID-19 pandemic, through to approximately six months later.

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

upon and derived from the [ethical principles stated in the IOA Code of Ethics](#).

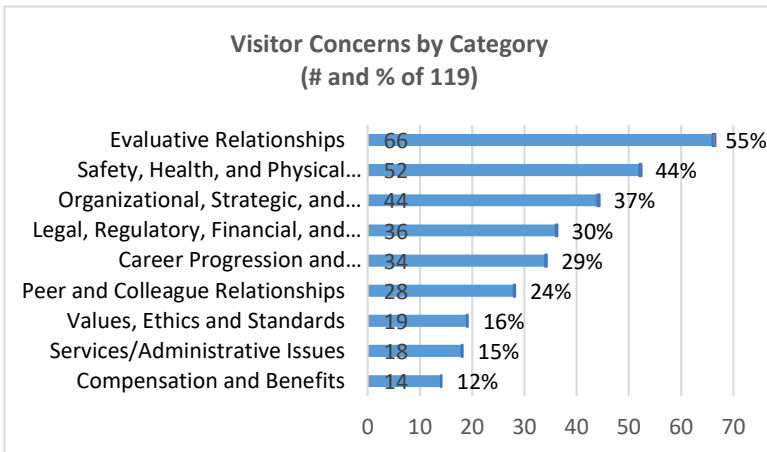
³ Individuals seeking assistance from the Ombuds Office are referred to as “visitors.”

⁴ The nine IOA categories and the eighty-seven subcategories can be found in the [International Ombudsman Association Uniform Reporting Categories](#).

Top Visitor Concerns – All Cohorts

The three most prevalent visitor concerns:

- **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)



Common Subcategories

The predominant subcategories that were discussed as related to these top concerns were:

- **Communication** (quality and/or quantity of communication);
- **Respect/Treatment** (demonstrations of inappropriate regard for people, not listening, rudeness, etc.);
- **Trust/Integrity** (suspicion that others are not being honest, whether or to what extent one wishes to be honest, 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);
- **Safety** (physical safety, injury, medical evacuation, meeting federal and state requirements for training and equipment);
- **Organizational climate** (issues related to organizational morale and/or capacity for functioning); and
- **Leadership/Management** (quality and capacity of management and/or management/leadership)

decisions, suggested training, reassignment, and reorganization).

Patterns & Trends

This Special Report covers a time that has been uniquely tumultuous and uncertain for the nation, for institutions, such as Brown, and for individuals, including those in the Brown community. The constellation of multiple challenges – Covid-19, racial unrest, political division, and economic decline – and their numerous impacts on the Brown community, have no doubt created new conflict and exacerbated already existing conflict.



In addition to the expected day-to-day conflicts that arise naturally when diverse human beings work together in a complex, multi-layered organization, many of the conflicts that visitors discussed involved added stress on the work front (e.g., due to different and quickly changing policies, expectations, and practices in the operations and academic spheres, increased trouble communicating and connecting with supervisors/colleagues/supervisees/advisors while practicing social and physical distancing, increased work load, blurring of home/work lines, concern about being onsite). Meanwhile, visitors also discussed the simultaneous challenges they were facing on the home front (e.g., juggling work and family responsibilities, figuring out child care/elder care/medical care, managing stress and mental health needs associated with the ongoing public health crisis, racial reckoning, economic uncertainty, job security).

Moreover, during this period, 26% of all visitors – 31 out of 119 visitors – talked with the Ombuds specifically about race matters, including bias incidents, discrimination, and harassment. Visitors spanned all roles (staff, faculty, and students). Visitors discussed perceived racism toward multiple groups, including Black/African American, Asian, and Latinx people.



Ombuds Education and Outreach Activities

- Met 1:1 or in small groups with over 75 University leaders
- Presented to over 32 groups, including to ALG, AAIM, Staff Town Hall, governance councils, departments, student groups, and team meetings on a number of matters, such as introducing the Ombuds Office, the importance of self-care, best practices for team work, working with difficult people, and active listening
- Launched the Staff Community Book Group (SCBG) pilot, involving five (5) additional facilitators and 37 staff participants

To seek confidential assistance, please reach out to the Brown University Ombuds at ombuds@brown.edu or 401-863-6145. Meetings are currently being conducted by phone or Zoom.