

Annual Report of the Brown University Ombuds Office 2015-2016  
Fall 2016

This report provides an overview of the Brown University Ombuds Office's activities from July 1, 2015 through June 31, 2016.

In February 2012, the University reopened the Faculty and Postdoc Ombuds Office and Ruthy Kohorn Rosenberg became the part-time Ombudsperson. In August 2013 the office was expanded to include graduate students, medical students and all staff, and the University Ombudsperson is now a full time position. The Office does not advertise to undergraduate students, but does not turn away those who visit. The University Ombudsperson reports to the President.

### **Ombuds Office Practice**

The Ombudsperson listens, offers information about policies and procedures, helps people identify and examine options for resolving concerns, offers education, consultation and coaching, accepts suggestions and data from individuals who seek a confidential channel for raising responsible concerns about the University, and helps to work for orderly and responsible systems change.

The Brown University Ombuds Office adheres to the International Ombudsman Association (IOA) Code of Ethics and Standards of Practice. Therefore, the Ombuds Office practices in the following manner. (For more detail please see the Ombuds Office website.)

The Ombuds Office does not identify visitors (people who talk to the Ombudsperson) or discuss their concerns with anyone without the visitor's permission and if the Ombudsperson agrees. The Ombudsperson does not have any reporting responsibility within the University and is not a 'responsible person' under Title IX. The exception to this is when the Ombudsperson determines there is an imminent risk of serious harm or the Ombudsperson is compelled to do so, by subpoena, for example.

The Ombudsperson functions on an informal and off-the-record basis. With the permission of the visitor, and at the Ombudsperson's discretion, the Ombudsperson may seek additional information or clarification.

The Ombudsperson is not authorized to accept "legal" notice to Brown University. The ombudsperson follows no prescribed sequence of steps, and does not participate in any formal adjudicatory processes. If a visitor wishes to engage in a formal procedure, such as filing a grievance or putting the University on notice, the Ombudsperson can provide information about how to do so.

The Ombuds Office does not keep permanent records of confidential communications. Permanent records kept by the Office include only statistical information for analyzing and reporting trends and recommendations to the University. All other records are regularly destroyed. The Ombuds Office Policies and Procedures are on its website at [Brown.edu/ombudsperson](http://Brown.edu/ombudsperson).

The Ombuds Office reports to the President about issues and trends but is independent of any University structure. The Ombudsperson advocates for fair process and its implementation.

The Ombudsperson is impartial and does not take sides or advocate for individuals, particular positions, outcomes or resolutions. The Ombudsperson seeks ways for individuals and groups to create mutual understanding and benefit. The Ombudsperson has no decision-making authority and does not judge, discipline or reward anyone. The Ombudsperson does advocate for fairness.

### **Educational Outreach and Community Involvement**

The Ombudsperson has made great effort to ensure that people in the Brown University community know about the Office and its services, and will continue to do so as this is an ongoing process. This includes making presentations at standing meetings of departments, informal meetings, resource fairs and other outreach efforts. Graduate students and faculty seem to know about the Ombuds Office, as do senior administrators. Staff in the academic enterprise seem to know about the Office, however, there is less knowledge among the staff in the administrative part of the university, and, as always, postdocs. Examples of this past year's efforts include the following: presentations to groups on the role of the Ombuds Office; convening groups for conversations on best practices, and workshops on concepts and skills on communication and conflict management/resolution topics to undergraduates, graduate students, faculty and staff. The Ombudsperson interacted with about 350 people in this way.

### **Ombuds Office Reporting**

The Ombuds Office operates as an informal resource and only collects non-identifying information. Each year the Ombudsperson critically examines the best practices for reporting.

The Ombuds Office tracks the following:

Number of visitors

Constituency of the visitor (faculty, postdoc, staff, graduate student, medical student, undergraduate student, or other – alumni, parents, etc.)

Concerns categories (the primary and secondary reasons why the visitor seeks Ombuds Office services.) A list of Concerns can be found in the appendix

Demographic data – gender, race/ethnicity

Ombudsperson action

### **Visitors**

A visitor is an individual who meets with the Ombudsperson regarding one or more concerns. The visitor may have additional follow-up meetings with the Ombudsperson regarding a concern but the meetings are still tallied as one visitor. Because the Ombuds Office does not keep identifying records, if a visitor meets with the Ombudsperson on a different occasion regarding a distinct new concern, then he/she is counted as a new visitor. For example a faculty member might meet with the Ombudsperson several times in January regarding a tenure issue and come back again in May to meet about a concern regarding an advisee. The January meeting would be counted as one visitor and the advising issue would be counted as one visitor.

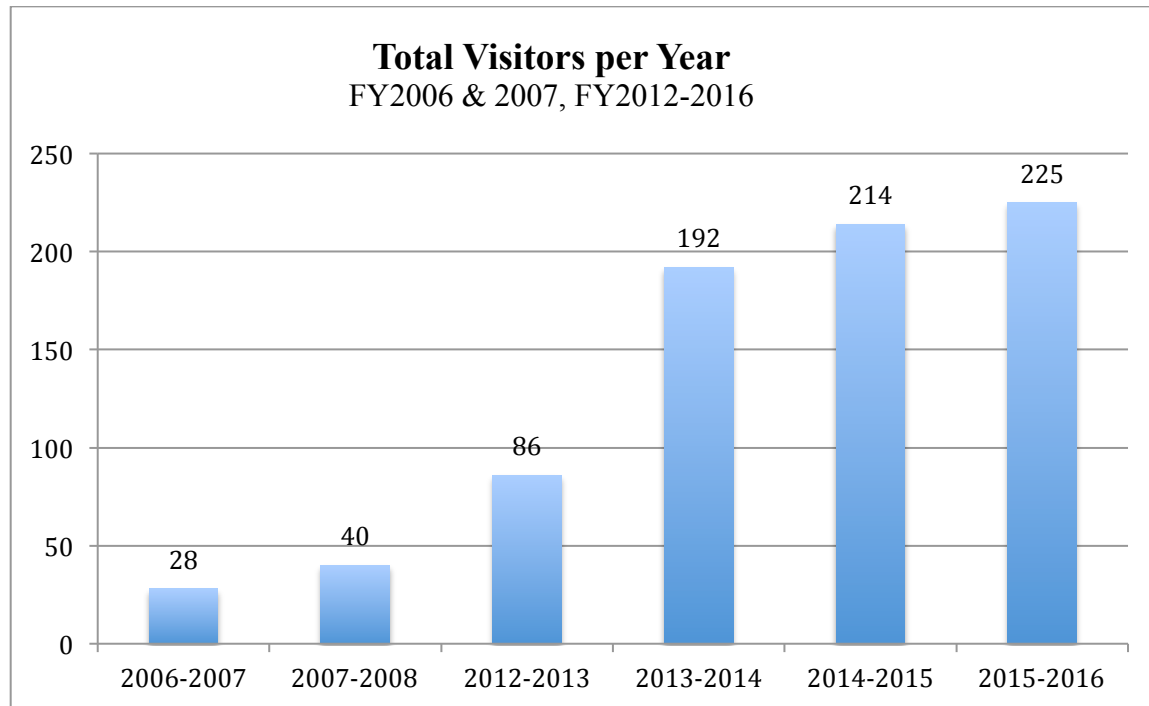
### Number of Visitors Data

The total number of Visitors from July 1, 2015 to June 30, 2016) was 225. About a quarter of Visitors came more than once.

This was the third year that the Ombuds Office was available to medical students, graduate students and staff. In the academic year 2012-2013, the Office was available to just faculty and postdocs.

Detail by Constituency	2015-2016
Faculty	45
Postdocs (Fellows & Research Assoc.)	3
Staff (exempt, non-exempt, union)	119
Graduate Students	35
Undergraduate Students	12
Other	11
Total	225

The chart below shows the increase in visitors since 2006. The Ombuds Office served only faculty in the first two years and then the office was dormant from 2008 until 2012. In 2012 it re-opened to serve faculty and postdocs. Starting in 2013 it expanded to include graduate students and staff. There has been a small but increasing number of undergraduates visiting the office.



In Appendix B, there are other comparative charts.

### Concerns Categories

Visitors may come about anything to do with their lives at Brown University. The Ombuds Office uses a list of Primary Concerns Categories and these represent issues that could be brought to the attention of the Ombudsperson by the visitor. As an informal resource, the Ombudsperson does not conduct investigations, or participate in formal adjudicative processes. While a Concern may represent the subjective view of the visitor, it is nonetheless a problem area for him or her, and may be of broader Concern to the University. The 14 broad Concern areas address the types of issues that visitors do bring to the Ombuds Office are listed with descriptions in the appendix.

### Concerns Data

The Office keeps track of primary and secondary Concerns. This is rather a simplistic way of illustrating often complex situations, but it provides a picture of the primary and secondary Concerns of the people who visited the Ombuds Office. The following chart shows the Concerns of all visitors in 2015-2016.



### Observations:

In general, most people who visit the Ombuds Office have great loyalty to Brown and want to do their job in the best way possible. Every visitor raises issue about fairness and their wish to be treated with dignity and respect.

The data shows that the four largest Concerns are evaluative relationships (ER), career progression and development (CPD), policy and practice (PP), and Concerns about the work or

educational environment (WEE). The INFO category is also large, this is the category where people are either communicating information, perceptions, experiences to the Ombudsperson or requesting information or assistance in accessing or understanding information, resources, policies, procedures, etc.

If you add the categories of harassment or discrimination (HD), and hostile environment or incivility (HEI) to the work/educational environment category (WEE), those three categories then become the largest set of Concerns. This suggests that the greatest area of Concerns for visitors is the perception of how they, and those around them, are treated and the functionality of the environment in which they are working or learning.

I thought it might be helpful to describe a little what fairness means? We all know what it feels like when we are treated unfairly. It is harder to describe what it means to be treated fairly. You might feel fairly treated if:

- You are told when a decision might affect you and the criteria on which the decision will be made
- You understand the information on which the decision maker is going to base her/his decision
- You know who the decision maker is
- You are provided the chance to provide your side of the story to the decision maker
- You receive information about alternative processes to resolve the issue when possible
- You receive a response from the decision maker within a reasonable timeframe
- You receive a decision that is supported by reasons
- You receive information on possible avenues of appeal when possible if you are unsatisfied with the decision.

Fairness does not require that everyone be treated in the exact same way – fair is not always equal. It will depend on the nature of the decision being made and how it might impact the individual. Fairness also does not mean you will necessarily receive the outcome you wanted – it does mean that certain steps should be followed.<sup>1</sup>

On an organizational level, people look for the organization to provides transparency about processes and policies, and to ‘walk the talk’ – that everyone at every level is encouraged to operate to the organization’s values, and that there are accountability measures in place.

### **Ombudsperson Role as Change Agent**

The purpose of this Annual Report is not to criticize or point out fault, but to convey areas of Concern. The Ombudsperson is interested in ensuring that the organization operates at its best, in terms of its people and its mission. It is a sign of strength that the institution recognizes that it is not perfect and that there is a process available to voice concerns and seek improvements. If one thinks about an organization as a system, it is helpful for the organization to know and understand where the organization is working and where it is not.

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<sup>1</sup> Thank you to the Office of Ombuds for Students, University of British Columbia for the idea of a definition of fairness and some content

The Ombudsperson reports on areas of Concern throughout the year, and reports overall trend data at the end of each year. In this way the Ombudsperson can act to make sure issues are addressed early and dealt with in the least escalated way, unless it is necessary to escalate an issue. In addition, trend data can underline the importance of issues that the administration has already noticed, or bring issues to the attention of the administration. In all situations the Ombudsperson takes great care to ensure Visitors confidentiality is ensured. So, depending on what permission is given by a Visitor there are different ways to raise issues including providing trend information in a non-identifying manner. While confidentiality may limit the Ombudsperson's ability to provide detail, there are still ways to raise issues and themes, especially when they cross divisions and/or the University. Individual's Concerns are very important and often the issues they raise for that part of the organization, or indeed the organization as a whole, are important to raise for the University to operate in the most effective way and in a way that it follows its values.

I would like to thank the Brown University community for their trust in the Ombuds Office, sharing important issues and your work to address those issues, and manage and resolve conflicts. It is a privilege to work with all of you.

Respectfully, Ruthy Kohorn Rosenberg  
Brown University Ombudsperson

Appendix A: Brown University Concerns Categories  
Appendix B: Comparative Trend Chart re Visitors

## Appendix A: Brown University Ombuds Office -- Concerns Categories

Employee Compensation & Benefit, Concerns, issues or inquiries re: equity, appropriateness or competitiveness of employee compensation, benefits and other benefit programs. ECB

Evaluative Relationships. Concerns. Concerns, issues or inquiries re: people in evaluative relationships (e.g., supervisor-employee, faculty-student.) May include differences in cultures, priorities, values, or beliefs; problems w/supervisory effectiveness, interpersonal relationships, communication or cooperation; mistrust, incivility, lack of cooperation, misunderstandings, etc. ER

Peer/Colleague Relationships. Concerns, issues or inquiries re peers/colleagues not in evaluative relationship (e.g., conflict between among staff, researchers in lab, or members of student organization.) May include differences in cultures, priorities, values, or beliefs; problems w/interpersonal relationships, communication, or cooperation; mistrust; incivility; misunderstandings, etc. PCR

Career Progression and Development. Concerns, issues or inquiries re: processes or decisions re: entering or leaving a job or job duties. May include job progression, stability, future potential, professional development, restructuring or changing organizational relationships, nature and place of assignment, termination, etc. This category includes graduate students, post-docs, etc. CPD

Legal, Regulatory, Financial and Compliance. Concerns, issues or inquiries perceived to be a risk (financial, sanction, legal, reputation etc.) for the organization or its members if not addressed. May include allegations of waste, fraud or abuse, including business judgment, illegal activity, slander or defamation of character. LRFC

Safety, Health, and Physical Environment, Concerns. Concerns, issues or inquiries re safety and health. May include fear of someone/something w/i the environment, potential for violence, etc. SHPE

Services/Administrative. Concerns, issues or inquiries re services or offices. May include quality of service, responsiveness, application of rules, behavior of service providers, etc. SA

Policy/Practice. Concerns, issues or inquiries re efficacy or equity of University policy or practice. May include perceived need for revision, failure to follow or to adhere to published document, etc. PP

Integrity: academic work, scholarship or intellectual property. Concerns, issues or inquiries re academic honesty, plagiarism, research integrity, ownership or authorship of intellectual property, etc. INTEG

Harassment or discrimination. Concerns, issues, or inquiries re: harassment, disparate treatment, or illegal discrimination based on protected class. HD

Hostile Environment/Incivility. Concerns, issues, or inquiries regarding harassment, hostile environment, or incivility, not based on protected class. HEI

Information Requests and Transferal. (i) Requests for information/assistance in accessing or understanding information, resources, policies, procedures, etc.; (ii) Communication of information, perceptions, experiences from visitor for edification of the Ombuds. INFO

Work or Educational Environment Concerns. Concerns, issues, or inquiries re: tone of workplace or educational environment, including leadership style, peer relationships, departmental dysfunction, or physical working environment. WEE

Other. Concerns issues, inquiries or requests for options about how to proceed with issues that do not fall within the above categories. O



Appendix B: Comparative Trend Data

Constituency	2006-2007	2007-2008	2012-2013	2013-2014	2014-2015	2015-2016
Faculty	28	40	56	47	45	45
Postdoc	0	0	5	3	2	3
Graduate, Medical, Professional Students	0	0	6	37	42	35
Undergraduates	0	0	0	5	2	12
Staff	0	0	19	98	120	119
Other	0	0	0	2	3	11
TOTALS	28	40	86	192	214	225

