

# **The Ombuds Office Annual Report**

**University of Idaho**

July 1, 2009 – June 30, 2010

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Ombuds

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## History

The use of a neutral intermediary to address conflict spans many continents, cultures and centuries. However, the ombudsman function and term dates back more recently to 1809, when the Swedish legislature created an office to receive citizen concerns and complaints. Since that time, the use of an ombudsman to facilitate conflict and problem resolution spread from their use exclusively in government entities to now being used in nearly all aspects of public and organizational life. Universities and other educational institutions began appointing ombudsmen in the 1960s.

The first University of Idaho ombudsman office was created in 1992 by President Elizabeth Zinser. Under the title of “Office of Faculty Ombudsman”, the office was originally staffed by a half time faculty member whose sole charge was to serve the faculty. Recognizing a growing need for staff ombudsman services, Carol Hahn was appointed “interim staff ombudsman” in 1994 and served for one year. The following year, the faculty ombudsman’s services were expanded to include staff. As the case load increased, President Robert Hoover approved the addition of a half-time, non-faculty assistant ombudsman, and Roxanne “Ellen” Schreiber was appointed to the position in 1998.

Over the next decade, the University of Idaho Ombudsman Office and the role of the ombudsman continued to evolve. In 2000, to more accurately reflect the role and responsibilities of the position, the original title of “assistant” ombudsman was changed to “associate.” This title was further modified in 2009, when the designation of “associate” was eliminated from the job title. In 2005, and of historical interest, in keeping with a growing national trend to emphasize the gender neutrality of the office and ombud’s position, the Faculty Senate adopted to change the office name and position titles to Ombuds Office and the ombuds. Most recently, in spring 2009, the Ombuds Office expanded its services to include students, taking yet another significant step in keeping with many university ombuds offices across the nation.

Those who have held or hold University of Idaho ombuds positions are

- David J. Walker, Dept. of Agricultural Economics/Rural Sociology, 1992-1999
- Thomas V. Trotter, Dept. of Counseling and School Psychology, Special Education, and Educational Leadership, 1999-2003
- Charles Morrison, Counseling and Testing Center, 2003-2005
- James R. Fazio, Dept. of Conservation Social Sciences, 2006-2009
- Roxanne “Ellen” Schreiber, 1998-present.

## Mission, Purpose and Function

The mission of the University of Idaho Ombuds Office is to support a positive and productive working, learning and living environment for faculty, staff and students by promoting mutual respect, ensuring fairness and resolving problems that emerge within the university. The primary purpose of the Ombuds Office is to resolve issues or conflicts informally and at the lowest possible level. The office also serves as an agent of positive change by helping to prevent problems, by identifying and surfacing issues of concern, and by providing timely and feedback. The Ombuds Office mission and purpose are accomplished by the following:

- listening to concerns
- analyzing problems and exploring options

- providing information about policies and services
- facilitating dialogue between individuals and groups
- mediating disputes
- applying conflict resolution and conciliation methods
- coordinating with other offices on campus
- providing training in human relations, communication and conflict resolution
- noting trends and impacts
- recommending changes in policy and/or work procedures

In fulfilling its purpose, the Ombuds Office adheres to the following Standards of Practice and the Code of Ethics established by the International Ombudsman Association:

***Independence.*** To ensure objectivity, the office operates independent of all university entities and reports to the highest possible level of the organization.

***Confidentiality.*** All contacts, conversations and information exchanged with the ombuds remain confidential and are not disclosed without the consent of the parties involved *and* the ombuds. Limits to confidentiality exist when disclosure is necessary to protect someone from harm and when otherwise required by law.

***Neutrality.*** An ombuds does not take sides nor represent nor advocate on behalf of any party or the university. Rather, it is the role of the ombuds to consider the facts, rights, interests, and safety of all parties involved in a search for a fair resolution to a problem. An ombuds advocates only for fairness and justice.

***Informality.*** Consultations are conducted “off the record” and do not constitute notice to the university in any way. No personal information is retained or used for subsequent formal proceedings. An ombuds will not serve as a witness nor offer testimony in any formal proceeding unless required by law. Although the process is informal, individuals using the services of the Ombuds Office retain their rights to all formal procedures ordinarily available to them.

### **Year in Review.**

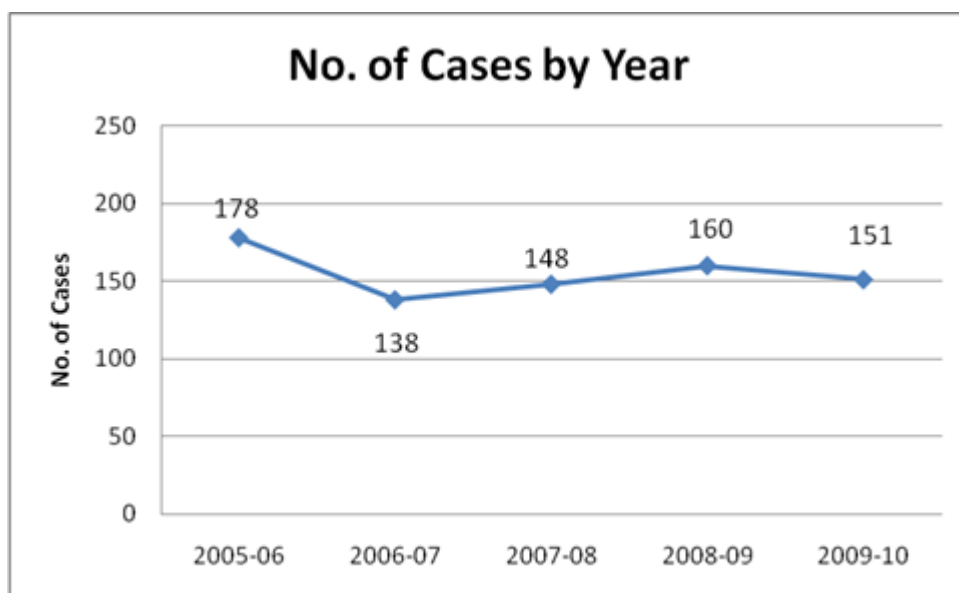
There were three noteworthy changes during FY 2009-10: (1) Ombuds James Fazio retired at the end of December 2009 after 33 years of university service; (2) Ombuds R. Ellen Schreiber was assigned to the Ombuds Office on a full time basis in January 2010; and 3) a visitor/user evaluation of services was implemented in January 2010.

***Staffing.*** The Ombuds Office was staffed primarily by one ombuds throughout the past year. Services were available to university employees and students during all business hours throughout the week and during extended hours and weekends, as necessary to accommodate varying work shifts and schedules. As in previous years, ombuds services during the summer were provided by Ombuds Ellen Schreiber, who serves on annual appointment, with Ombuds Jim Fazio filling in during vacation periods, as needed and when available.

Throughout the fall semester, and in preparation for his retirement at the end of December, Ombuds Fazio served on an on-call basis, and Ombuds Schreiber provided full time, on-site coverage. In January 2010, Ombuds Schreiber was assigned to fulltime ombuds duties. Efforts to identify and retain a faculty member to fill the vacant part time ombuds faculty position were undertaken, but unsuccessful. Recruiting efforts are expected to resume in fall semester 2010.

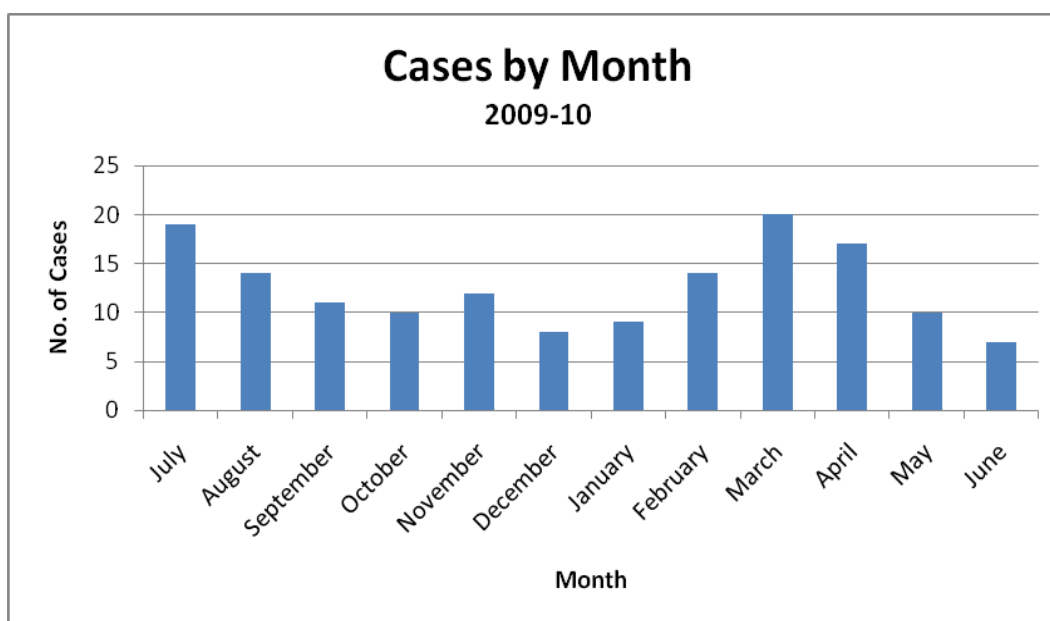
Ann Thompson, who works jointly for the Faculty Secretary and the Ombuds Office, continued to provide administrative assistance.

**Case Load.** For the purpose of reporting, a ‘case’ is a new or recurrent issue that is brought to the ombuds’ attention by one or more individuals seeking assistance, or it is an issue in which an ombuds becomes aware of and takes self-directed action. A case can vary from a single informational visit to a highly complex and involved intervention that requires multiple parties and meetings, complex issues, direct intervention and considerable time. The Ombuds Office addressed 151 cases in FY2009-10. This represents a slight decrease of nine cases compared to last year and was well within the normal fluctuation from year to year (Figure 1). The total number of cases reported in any year is a conservative figure given that there are numerous contacts that occur informally and spontaneously during the course of conducting business. While some of these encounters may result in case entries, others are treated as part of the ombuds’ function.



**Figure 1: Total number of ombuds cases by year.**

Similar to previous years, the number new cases by month showed modest fluctuations. While several of the highest months for new cases continued to be in February, March and April, these months coincide with a number of annual employment actions (performance evaluations and notifications of non-renewal, etc.) and are anticipated and predictable. However, July, August and November showed the greatest increases in new cases over the previous year. These increases were paralleled by decreases in other months. No trends or patterns emerged to account for these changes (Figure 2).



**Figure 2: Ombuds cases by month**

**Nature of Visitors and Contacts.** A slight majority of visitors to the Ombuds Office in 2009-10 were males (52%). This represents a 10% increase from the previous year where males accounted for 42% of visitors. As in the previous year, nearly three quarters of all visitors (73%) sought ombuds assistance on their own initiative rather than by referral. However, efforts taken during the year to increase awareness and understanding of the Ombuds Office and function may account for a welcomed (3%) increase in referrals by supervisors, administrators and others.

Table 1 shows that all categories of employees continued to use ombuds services in proportions similar to their distribution within the university, which is consistent with previous years. There was an increase (7%) in number of students who sought ombuds' assistance. This figure does not include graduate assistants, who are counted separately and who also showed a slight increase. Additionally, there was a 5% increase in administrators who accessed services over the previous year.

**Table 1: UI Affiliation by Percentage of Cases**

Affiliation	2003-04	2004-05	2005-06	2006-07	2007-08	2008-09	2009-10
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Classified Staff	43	43	41	44	42	40	35
Faculty (tenured)	19	17	23	19	23	20	18
Faculty (non-tenured)	-	-	-	-	-	-	3
Administration	12	23	13	13	12	10	15
Exempt	14	9	13	15	16	18	9
Graduate Assistants	2	5	3	1	2	1	3
Grad Students	2	1	1	1	1	1	4
Undergraduates	0	0	0	0	3	3	6
Retiree	-	-	1	1	-	1	0
Other	4	2	5	1	1	6	8
Missing data	0	0	0	4	-	-	-

In the majority of cases (68%) only one individual was directly involved; this is typical for most ombuds offices and in keeping with previous years for this office. While in most cases there is at least one other person of concern, this figure indicates that, if the concern involved another party, they were not contacted or involved in resolving the problem. Where multiple parties *were* directly involved, the number of parties totaled 240. This is up slightly from the previous year (Table 2). [Note: One case was recorded as zero parties (either due to an Ombuds self-initiating the case or due to missing data), and two cases involved entire units (and thus large numbers); these were treated as outliers for reporting purposes.]

Face-to-face consultation is the preferred format for ombuds consultation and is encouraged whenever possible. Most contacts with the ombuds involved office visits (74%). Today's video call options made face-to-face consultation even more widely available than in previous years and was well-received. Telephone contacts accounted for 25% of consultations; and, although actively discouraged due to confidentiality concerns, email or other written modes of communication (letters, notes, etc.) nonetheless accounted for 2% of contacts.

**Table 2: Number of Individuals (Parties) per Ombuds Case**

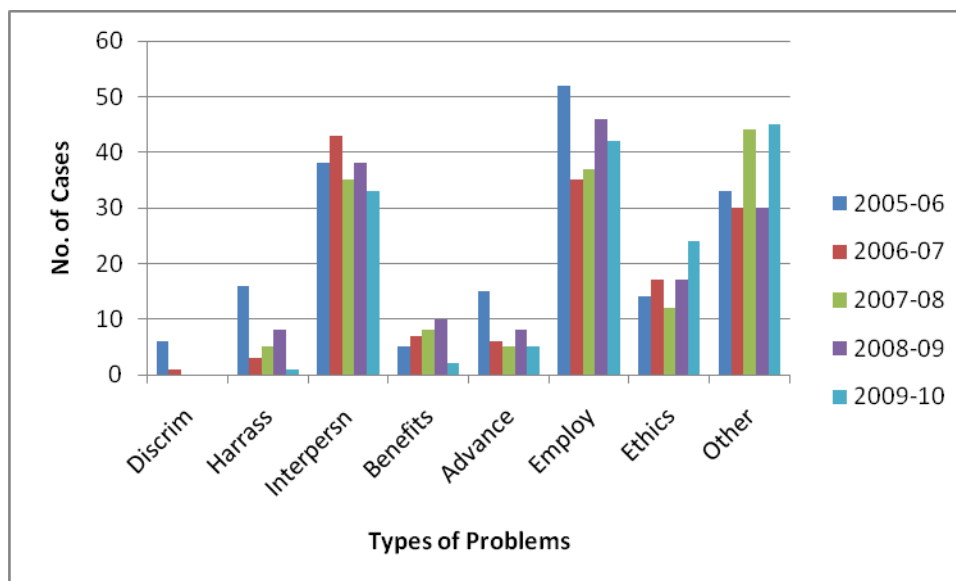
<u>Individuals Involved</u>	<u>No. of Cases</u>	<u>Total Parties</u>
0	1	0
1	101	101
2	31	62
3	5	15
4	5	20
5	2	10
6	1	6
7	2	14
12	1	12
	<b>Total Individuals</b>	<b>240</b>
 <u>Large scale involvement/unit/department</u>		
47	1	
62	1	

Cases varied significantly in the amount of ombuds involvement needed (reported as "contacts"). Relatively few cases (17%) involved only one visit or contact with no further ombuds involvement. However, the great majority involved multiple consultations or contacts with the visitor (or person bringing the case) and by the ombuds with others involved or who were a resource for addressing the concern (e.g., administrators, supervisors, General Counsel, Human Resources, Human Rights, Access and Inclusion, etc.). Contacts totaled 629 for the year, and represent a modest increase from the previous year. Table 3 shows the number of contacts per case.

**Table 3: Number of Contacts per Case**

No. of Contacts	Cases	Percentage of Cases
		%
1	25	17
2	40	26
3	22	15
4	21	14
5	3	2
6	12	8
7	4	3
8	6	4
9	6	4
11	3	2
12	2	1
13	1	1
14	4	3
15	1	1
16	1	1
<b>Total Contacts</b>	<b>629</b>	

**Nature of the Problems.** Every organization will have areas of concerns or problems that emerge within the normal process of conducting business. The University of Idaho is fortunate to have multiple resources available to members of the community to help address issues and problems constructively. The *nature* of problems presented to the Ombuds Office can potentially inform the university of areas and issues that need attention. Figure 3 shows the distribution of problem categories received by the Ombuds Office in 2009-10. Each category is then discussed in detail.

**Figure 3: Problem type by year brought to the Ombuds Office**

**Discrimination:** Once again, there were no instances of discrimination brought directly to the Ombuds Office during the 2009-10 year. In some cases, individuals who had such concerns or complaints contacted the Ombuds Office *after* their issues were assessed or addressed for assistance with non-discrimination issues. It appears that the university community is well-informed about the formal channels for addressing discrimination issues.

**Harassment:** Like discrimination, incidents of harassment perceived as due to age, disability, race, religion and sex seem to be making their way to the appropriate formal offices. One case of perceived persistent interference or bullying was reported. There were no cases presented with other harassment issues.

**Interpersonal Disputes:** Interpersonal conflicts were the second highest category of cases received by the office. Tensions and disputes between individuals in the workplace are often intensely disruptive, distracting and distressing for all parties and non-parties (co-workers, supervisors, etc.). Similar to previous years, many cases involved perceptions of incivility, disrespect and/or unfair treatment; Interpersonal disputes can overlap with the harassment category. Of the 33 cases reported, the visitor to the Ombuds Office was in conflict with one or more of the following:

Administration	5 cases
Advisor	1
Co-worker	3
Supervisor	7
Supervisee	8
Faculty	6
Others	3

**Benefits:** There were only 2 cases attributed primarily to issues of benefits during the year. This is a solid decrease from the 6 cases during the previous year. Retirement and/or insurance benefits and issues related to sick and annual leave were the only two areas that were sources of problems in this category.

**Advancement:** For the second year, 5 cases came under this category. Four cases involved salary disputes, and 1 case was related to promotion. No patterns or trends emerged from these cases.

**Employment:** Employment is the largest category with 25 “specifiers” or specific areas of concern. There were 42 cases that fell into this category, which is a slight decrease over the previous year. Of the specifiers, evaluations were again the most frequent source of conflict with 9 cases. Although down significantly from last year, the evaluation process continues to be an area where there is recurring and intense tension. The number of cases in each specifier or subcategory is shown in Table 4 along with the change from last year.



**Table 4: Breakdown of 42 Cases in ‘Employment’ Category, Ranked by Frequency**

	Change from last year		Change from last year
Evaluations	9 -4	Reorganization	2 +1
Termination – for cause	2 -3	Accommodations for Disability	1 +1
Management	4 0	Assistantship Appointment	0 0
Job Description	1 -3	Demotion	0 0
Reassignment	3 -1	Hiring Interview	0 0
Probation (performance)	1 -2	Marital Issues	0 0
Working Conditions	4 +1	Office Space/Conditions	0 0
Workload	2 0	Program Termination	0 0
Flex Time/Location	0 -1	Scheduling	0 0
Resignation	1 0	Teaching Load/Course Assign.	3 +3
Salary Agreement	1 0	Termination – Layoff	3 +2
Hiring Process	3 +2	Termination – Performance	0 -1
Reclassification	2 +1	Termination – Cause	2 --

**Ethical Concerns:** There were 24 cases involving ethical concerns during the reporting year. This is a significant increase of 7 cases over last year, and it is the second notable increase in two years. Cases were distributed as follows:

Fiscal management	2 cases
Deception/misrepresentation/theft	1
Records management	1
Intellectual property	1
Health/safety	5
Others	14

Visits to the Ombuds Office frequently involve multiple issues. Although some of the categories listed above show zero, it does *not* mean that the topic was not part of any visitor’s reason for using the Ombuds Office. For data management purposes, only the *predominant* or *precipitating* reason for contact is used. On the other hand, some cases defy placement in *any* of the established categories. These are listed as “*other*” and are shown below.

**Others:** Forty-five cases did not fit the categories defined above. Ten cases involved entire departments or entire work units. These cases were most often brought to the Ombuds Office by the unit administrator. Typically, these are complex cases, require considerable time parties, and impact the university environment in profound ways. While it is not always possible to remedy the multitude of issues that emerge throughout entire units, successful efforts were made in preventing unnecessary further deterioration of these cases.

General descriptions within the ‘other’ category, along with the number of cases, are shown below.

	Number of cases	Change from last year
Department/unit function	10	0
Miscellaneous	9	+2
Committee function	1	-2
Academic issues	9	+6
Department head (misc. problems)	5	+2
Disciplinary action	7	+4
Financial aid	2	+1
Training	0	0
Facilitation	2	-

**Resolution of Problems.** Ombuds use a variety of processes to assist visitors with addressing concerns and resolving problems. Most cases involve multiple actions, so categories are *not* mutually exclusive. The types of ombuds’ actions taken once again remained fairly consistent with previous years. Intercession or active intervention increased by 8 percent. This is informative as active interventions require considerably more ombuds’ time and attention. Four basic categories of ombuds’ actions are summarized in Table 5 below.

**Table 5: Actions Used by Ombuds**

Action	Cases	Percentage of Cases
Problem exploration	136	90%
Information only	66	44
Intercession (e.g., mediation, shuttle diplomacy, facilitation)	58	38
Referrals (e.g., EAP, HR, Human Rights, Access and Inclusion, deans, supervisors, advisors)	50	33

**Other Services.** The Ombuds Office also provided employee in-service training and academic presentations on various human relations skills, including civility, conflict management, communication and other topics within the ombuds’ expertise. Facilitation services for college/department/unit retreats and special meetings were also provided. As in previous years, the ombuds was also called upon to serve as a designated neutral observer and process monitor. The following presentations and services were provided:

***Training and In-service Presentations***

- Building a Positive Workplace Culture, 2-hr workshop
- Building an Inclusive and Welcoming Campus Community, UI Leadership Retreat, developed and co-presented session
- Facilitated college faculty retreat
- Building a Positive Workplace Culture, 2-hr workshop
- Managing Intense Interactions (Keeping Your Cool While Others Lose Theirs)
- Managing Differences & Conflict, 2-hr workshop
- Self-stewardship & the Sustainable Professional, Staff Development session
- Team Future Building, 2-hr session, intervention

- Facilitated college faculty and advisory council meeting
- Working Together in Teams: Essentials for Successful Group Work, class lecture
- Facilitated college-wide, 3-hr meeting
- It's Your Workplace: Building a Positive Culture, 2-hr workshop
- Our Culture, Our Commitment, brief presentation
- Managing Differences and Conflict, class lecture
- Conflict Management, class lecture
- Leadership Academy session: Conflict Management
- Self-stewardship & the Sustainable Professional , UI Extension and Outreach Annual Conference
- Leadership Academy session: Intercultural Communication

### *Campus Committees/Service*

#### **University Service**

- Goal Four Team
- Threat Assessment Team
- Campus Emergency Preparedness and Response Team
- Benefits Advisory Group
- Professional Development Steering Committee
- Professional Development and Learning Advisory Committee
- Pandemic planning
- Graduate student masters committee
- Women's Leadership Planning Committee
- Student mentoring

#### **Professional Service**

- International Ombudsman Association (IOA), Board of Directors
- International Ombudsman Association (IOA), Professional Development Committee

#### **Public/Community Service**

- American Red Cross, Disaster Action Team, Disaster Mental Health Counselor

**Professional Development.** Continuing professional development is essential to providing quality ombuds and other professional services to the university. During the past year, the ombuds engaged in an array of professional development activities, in addition to reading the International Ombudsman Association and other professional publications and participating in ombuds' list serves. The ombuds participated in the following:

- Professional Ethics, Idaho Mental Health Association, 3 CEUs, Gritman Medical Center, Moscow, Idaho
- Anger Management, 7 CEUs, PESI, online course
- Law and Ethics, 7 CEUs, PESI, online course
- Group decision making models and techniques, self-study, ~ 20 hrs.
- Organizational facilitation, self-study, ~ 20 hrs.
- Mental Health First Aid Class

- Incident Command System (ICS) 800, FEMA
- ICS 700, FEMA
- ICS 300, FEMA
- Disaster Simulation and Training, N. Central Idaho Red Cross, Lewiston, Idaho, 2-day full-scale exercise.

**Effectiveness of the Ombuds Office.** One continuing challenge for nearly all ombuds offices--regardless of their organization or setting--is how to assess the impacts and outcomes of ombuds services. Given the confidential nature of the ombuds' function, these benefits are difficult to measure or report since confidentiality precludes the use of many usual forms of evaluation. Anecdotally, ombuds know how important it is to be heard and understood. It is also much more productive and satisfying to experience a positive workplace or learning environment, and is much easier on all parties to resolve problems informally and at the lowest level possible. Although not all issues can be completely or adequately resolved through informal means, it is very apparent that the ombuds emphasis on parties remaining unconditionally respectful and constructive frequently prevents further deterioration of already difficult situations. While difficult to measure, this is an important influence in fostering safe and secure campuses and is a significant benefit of the Ombuds Office.

The Ombuds Office currently uses two evaluation methods to assess the outcomes and impacts of services. The first is based on the ombuds' self-analysis of completed cases using a scale ranging between the 'satisfactory' and 'unsatisfactory' resolution of cases; it is not a measure of visitor satisfaction. The scale attempts to evaluate the outcome and impact of each case as objectively as possible.

For 2009-10, the ombuds self-appraisal of cases showed 87% of the cases being addressed 'satisfactorily,' 13% had a 'neutral' outcome, and less than 1% were considered 'unsatisfactorily' resolved. It is important to note that the very experience of thinking through an issue with an impartial skilled listener may contribute to more positive and less destructive outcomes in any issue, even when a visitor or the university's actions have already occurred or been decided. The self-appraisal of ombuds cases for 2009-10 is summarized (using rounded numbers) in Table 5.

**Table 5: Self-Appraisal of Outcomes/Impacts Ombuds Cases, 2009-10**

Outcome Category	Percentage of Cases (N=151)
<b>Resolved satisfactorily with Ombuds Office assistance</b>	<b>87%</b>
Agreement/compromise reached through mediation; formal action avoided; visitor given another chance or situation otherwise satisfactorily resolved.	8%
Conflict resolved short of mediation; may involve ‘shuttle diplomacy’ or similar intervention, workshops with entire unit, or other techniques; formal action not taken.	19%
Ombuds served, by invitation or suggestion, as neutral observer; may involve role as moderator, but not mediator; party(ies) satisfied with outcome; formal action not taken.	7%
Information only was provided by Ombuds; and/or helps party to self-advocate; visitor satisfied.	50%
Action resulted in policy or system modification/improvement	3%
Other	0%
<b>Neutral Outcome (Ombuds Office had no direct impact)</b>	<b>13%</b>
Ombud’s role was primarily as a neutral listener; little or no ‘coaching’ or additional information was provided. Visitor already had or did not need information, but needed ‘someone to listen;’ may have received confirmation of ideas/plans, but nothing new added by Ombuds.	9%
Visitor initiated and then canceled or ‘vanished’ after setting appointment or before follow-up action was completed.	1%
Situation ‘unrepairable’ upon arrival (e.g. temporary help. already is terminated, tenure was denied for appropriate reason, or visitor resigned).	2%
Other	1%
<b>Results Unsatisfactory</b>	<b>&lt;1%</b>
Visitor disgruntled with Ombuds efforts and discontinued visits or contacts.	0
Visitor disregarded advice/solution and suffered consequences.	0
Unfair practice or situation not resolved nor corrected due to lack of cooperation.	<1%
Other	0

Use of ombuds visitor satisfaction and outcome assessments is known to pose a number of challenges. Among the more common issues are how a party's role in the case, as well as their desired or expected outcomes, influences their perceptions of satisfaction and success, and also the commonly low evaluation response rates. Despite these and other potential limitations, a new visitor feedback assessment was implemented in spring 2010. It is hoped that information gleaned from this brief instrument will contribute to strengthening the office and the delivery of services.

The Ombuds Office Visitor Feedback Form (Table 6) provides an opportunity for visitors and primary parties involved in an issue to provide anonymous feedback on services and outcomes. The instrument is designed primarily to support the ombuds' continuous improvement and is not intended as a formal statistical measure. When the information gathered is paired with the ombuds' self-appraisal of outcomes and impacts, it offers a means for gauging impacts, effectiveness and visitor satisfaction more effectively.

Every effort is made to ensure the anonymity of the responding party. No identifying information is requested on the feedback form. Completed forms are sent by visitors/parties to the Provost's Office for processing by a staff member dedicated to administrative evaluations. A summary report is provided to the ombuds annually.

From late January through May 2010, approximately 60 forms were distributed to visitors and primary parties. While the intent was to receive feedback from all initiating case visitors and primary parties, not all individuals chose to provide contact information or to participate. Of the forms distributed, 24 were returned representing a return rate of approximately 40%.

Overall, the summarized feedback was consistent with the ombuds self-appraisals and supported the conclusion that ombuds' services were appreciated and perceived as helpful to individuals who sought assistance with difficult issues.

### Table 6: Ombuds Office Visitor Feedback Form

Thank you for taking a moment to provide feedback on your visit to the Ombuds Office; your responses will help us improve services. Please rate your experience by marking the appropriate boxes below and mail the completed form to Campus Zip 3152.

**Please do not include any identifying information (name, position or concern).**

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree	Not Applicable
I was able to talk with an ombuds in a timely manner.						
The ombuds explained his/her role and the confidential, neutral, informal (“off the record”), and independent standards of the office.						
The ombuds explained the limitations of confidentiality.						
The ombuds functioned neutrally and did not take sides.						
I was treated respectfully.						
The ombuds helped me to clarify my issue(s) and identify options.						
The ombuds provided helpful information (policies/procedures, communication/conflict resolution skills, and referral).						
The ombuds helped me to address or better manage my concern.						
The ombuds helped me resolve my concern or helped prevent it from deteriorating or escalating unnecessarily.						
I would use the Ombuds Office again, if needed.						
Comments:						
Please mark (X) your university affiliation:	<b>Faculty</b>	<b>Staff</b>	<b>Administrator</b>	<b>Student</b>	<b>Other:</b>	

## Issues and Recommendations

Throughout the year, the Ombuds Office contributed to the achievement of the university's Organization, Culture and Climate goal by helping to foster and support a working, learning and living environment that is "characterized by openness, trust...and mutual respect" (2005-2010 Strategic Action Plan). In accordance with the *Faculty-Staff Handbook* (FSH), several issues and general recommendations are offered below.

*The ombuds are encouraged to comment on policies, procedures and processes with an eye to positive future change. These observations should be shared with the administrators and bodies with jurisdiction over those policies, procedures, and processes. (FSH 3820 B-6)*

It is important to preface the following issues and recommendations by noting that the nature of concerns or problems presented to the Ombuds Office in 2009-10 were most often what might be considered 'situational' or specific to a set of circumstances rather than clear systemic problems. In most instances where issues with processes or procedures were specific to a responsibility area, they were brought directly to the attention of the respective administrator and are not addressed below. Several recommendations from the previous year are included as these continue to present opportunities for improvement.

- **Issue: Workplace climate.** Regardless of presenting issues to the Ombuds Office, concerns and complaints about the workplace climate and the subsequent impact on morale continue to be frequent and occur at all organizational levels. Specifically, issues with interpersonal behavior are the most common complaint (e.g. problems with respectful communication, a poverty of trust behaviors, issues of fairness, conflict management, etc.).

**Recommendation:** Consider re-invigorating or refocusing efforts to orient all members of the university community on the university's cultural expectations. Provide skills training and open dialogues and discussion to increase awareness.
- **Issue: Use of email.** Inappropriate use of email is a frequent, increasing and highly charged problem. In many cases, the use of email to address relational concerns, performance issues and to inform others (cc/bcc/forwarding) about problems has caused and/or exacerbated many conflicts.

**Recommendation:** Consider establishing recommendations for appropriate workplace email use and educating the university community on email etiquette.
- **Issue: Changes in administrative processes and procedures.** There is a continuing concern that some modifications in administrative processes or procedures have unintended or excessive negative impacts and create hardship on certain positions that rely on those processes.

**Recommendation:** Consider establishing a means of providing background information on proposed changes (including the need for the change and intended advantages); seek time-limited input from those most likely to be impacted by the change.
- **Issue: Search committee practices and processes.** Concerns about search committee processes and conduct have been noted. Specific concerns include disclosures of



confidential discussions and decisions, and, in some instances, perceived inappropriate efforts to influence.

**Recommendation:** Consider implementing: 1) a training or orientation prerequisite for individuals who are new to search committee service and, 2) reviewing search committee expectations and conduct at the beginning of new searches.

- **Issue: Supervisory skills.** A host of problems repeatedly emerge regarding supervisory skills. These range from ensuring that new employees have adequate opportunity to learn new tasks and skills, providing *respectful, constructive and timely* feedback, maintaining confidential information, maintaining a healthy workplace climate, and managing conflict arising in the workplace and taking action to stop persistent problem behaviors.

**Recommendation:** Consider implementing required and desired supervisor skills training for new or marginally experienced supervisors, and offer continuing supervisor development and mentoring.
- **Issue: Graduate study plans, expectations of major professors and committee members.** Misunderstandings and conflict arise when finalized or updated study plans are not formally developed and filed early in a student's program or soon after a change agreement is reached

**Recommendation:** Consider establishing protocols or reemphasizing existing protocols for filing finalized and revised study plans. Discussions of expectations, informal memorandums of agreements or other communications about expectations and timelines between the major professor, committee members and student at the onset of the relationship may prove helpful and help prevent later misunderstandings.
- **Issue: Managing workplace change, reorganization.** Employees working in units that are undergoing restructuring, revised responsibilities or reassignment and/or a significant change in leadership or coworkers frequently experience increased workplace stress and often conflict.

**Recommendation:** Consider planning support strategies and provide resources for the natural and predictable period of adjustment.

## Acknowledgements

I appreciate the trust and cooperation of the faculty, staff, administration and students, without which the Ombuds Office could not function effectively. Additionally, I want to acknowledge the good faith efforts of many in the pursuit of fair and respectful solutions to frequently challenging issues.

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