

THE WVU FACULTY OMBUDSPERSON OFFICE

*A confidential, independent, informal and neutral
conflict resolution resource for WVU faculty
members*

WVU FACULTY OMBUDSPERSON OFFICE ANNUAL REPORT

2019-2020 Academic Year

Prepared and Submitted by
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June 29, 2020

Table of Contents

A MESSAGE FROM THE WVU FACULTY OMBUDSPERSON	2
YEAR AT A GLANCE	3
INTRODUCTION TO THE FACULTY OMBUDSPERSON OFFICE	4
HISTORY	4
LOCATION AND STAFFING	4
CONSTITUENTS SERVED	5
MISSION AND FUNCTION	5
STANDARDS OF PRACTICE	6
ACTIVITIES AND ACCOMPLISHMENTS FOR THE 2019-2020 ACADEMIC YEAR	7
HOURS SERVED	7
BUILDING THE WVU FACULTY OMBUDSPERSON OFFICE	7
OUTREACH ACTIVITIES	8
ASSISTING VISITORS	8
OFFICE UTILIZATION.....	9
NUMBERS OF VISITORS AND CASES	9
TENURE STATUS AND FACULTY RANK	10
CASE INVOLVEMENT	11
METHODS USED TO ASSIST VISITORS.....	12
RESOLUTION OF CONCERNS	13
WORKPLACE CONCERNS AND OBSERVATIONS.....	15
SUMMARY OF CONCERNS RAISED	15
OBSERVATIONS	17
RECOMMENDATIONS	19
ONGOING EFFORTS BY WVU ADMINISTRATION.....	19
MANAGING CONFLICT	19
REDUCING AND PREVENTING INCIVILITY	20
BUILDING AND RESTORING TRUST	21
POLICY IMPLEMENTATION.....	22
POLICY GAPS	22
INVESTIGATION PROCEDURES	22
KNOWLEDGE, SKILL, AND SUPPORT NEEDS	23
PRIORITIES FOR THE 2020-2021 ACADEMIC YEAR.....	24
CONCLUSION.....	24

A Message from the WVU Faculty Ombudsperson

It is an honor to share with you the WVU Faculty Ombudsperson Office Annual Report for the 2019-2020 academic year. This is the first report in my tenure as the WVU Faculty Ombudsperson. I am Jodi Goodman, and I have been serving as faculty ombudsperson since Fall 2019. I'm also a professor of management in the John Chambers College of Business and Economics.

As you may know, the faculty ombudsperson position was vacant for quite some time before my appointment. Reestablishing the Office this year has been challenging and rewarding, and I have learned so much in the process. I rebuilt the Office from the ground up by writing the Charter of the WVU Faculty Ombudsperson Office, getting permission to serve as a [BOG Rule 1.6](#) designated confidential resource, building the website, engaging in extensive professional development, preparing the dedicated physical office space in Morgan House, and otherwise preparing to begin meeting with visitors.¹ I officially started to welcome visitors October 1, 2019.

I invite you to visit the [WVU Faculty Ombudsperson Office website](#) for documentation and additional information, including, for example, the Charter of the WVU Faculty Ombudsperson Office and FAQ.

I appreciate the assistance and support I've received from multiple offices and individuals inside WVU and externally. I hope those I've met so far along the way and readers of this report see the value the Faculty Ombudsperson Office adds to WVU.

I look forward to continuing to serve as your faculty ombudsperson in the next academic year.

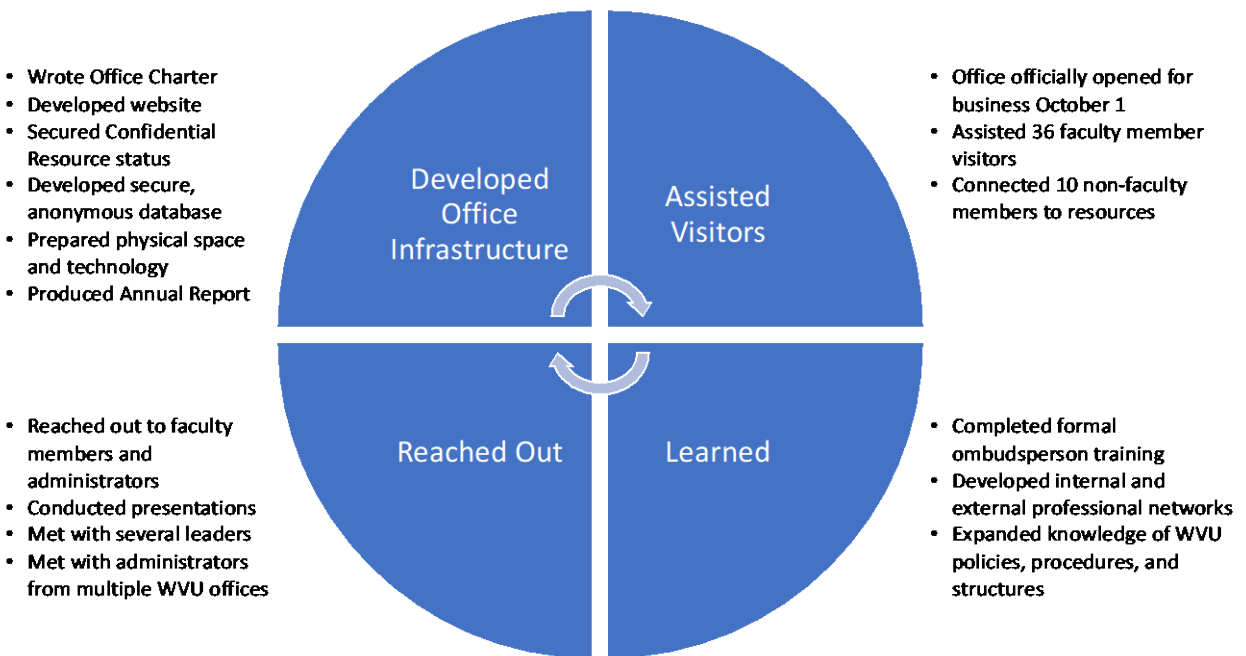
Respectfully Submitted,

Jodi S. Goodman, Ph.D.
Faculty Ombudsperson
West Virginia University

¹ The International Ombudsman Association (IOA) refers to people who seek assistance from an ombudsperson as "visitors."

Year at a Glance

The figure below outlines the primary duties I performed during the 2019-2020 academic year. I produced the Annual Report during the summer. Detailed information appears in the body of the Annual Report.



Introduction to the Faculty Ombudsperson Office

This section provides a brief introduction to the Faculty Ombudsperson Office. Please see the [WVU Faculty Ombudsperson Office website](#) for comprehensive information, including, for example, the Charter of the Faculty Ombudsperson Office and FAQ.

History

The West Virginia University Faculty Ombudsperson Office was founded April 1, 2016 to provide assistance to faculty members across WVU campuses to resolve workplace problems in a confidential, informal, neutral, and independent manner. The office was established by the WVU Office of the Provost; however, the services are not managed or controlled by WVU administration.

Thomas Patrick, JD, served as the first WVU faculty ombudsperson. The Faculty Ombudsperson Office was vacant for more than a year following Tom's retirement. The office was reestablished in August 2019, when I was appointed as faculty ombudsperson (hereafter cited as ombuds).

Location and Staffing

Morgan House (Office 200)
660 N. High Street
P.O. Box 6412
Morgantown, WV 26506-6412
Phone: (304) 293-.6338
Email: faculty_ombudsperson@mail.wvu.edu

The ombuds position is 25% FTE for 9-months. I am the sole practitioner, and there are no other employees associated with the WVU Faculty Ombudsperson Office.

I also serve 75% FTE as professor of management in the John Chambers College of Business and Economics, and I strive to keep my two roles separate. The Faculty Ombudsperson Office has a dedicated office, email address, and phone line. The Morgan House location was chosen because it does not house faculty offices or other faculty services. In addition, I strive to remain cognizant of which role I am serving in at all times and act accordingly.

Constituents Served

WVU faculty members across all WVU campuses are welcome to seek services. The Faculty Ombudsperson Office is located on the Morgantown campus and serves faculty members from other WVU campuses by phone and video conferencing.

Faculty Ombudsperson Office services are available to full-time and part-time faculty members, including faculty members with administrative roles, who hold the following positions, as defined by [BOG Rule 4.2](#):

- Tenured assistant, associate, and full professor
- Tenure-track instructor, assistant, associate, and full professor
- Clinical, research, service, and teaching non-tenure track instructor, assistant, associate, and full professor
- Extension tenure-track and non-tenure track instructor, assistant, associate, and full professor
- Librarian-track staff, assistant, associate, and university librarian
- Lecturer and senior lecturer
- Visiting instructor, assistant, associate, and full professor

Mission and Function

The Office of the West Virginia University Faculty Ombudsperson offers a safe, unique setting for faculty members to talk about workplace concerns in an open and candid manner, without fear of reprisal. The Faculty Ombudsperson Office serves as a [BOG Rule 1.6](#) designated confidential resource² for assisting WVU faculty members in managing workplace conflicts and concerns. It provides an alternative to formal conflict resolution channels. The Faculty Ombudsperson Office operates as a confidential, informal, neutral, and independent resource, in accordance with the [International Ombudsman Association Standards of Practice and Code of Ethics](#). The ombuds does not advocate for faculty members or for the University, nor is she a representative of the University. Instead, the ombuds works toward just and equitable resolution of concerns presented and provides feedback to University officials on general trends and systemic issues, while protecting confidentiality. The ombuds acts with integrity and emphasizes and promotes fairness, procedural justice, and respect for all members of the University community.

The ombuds serves as a resource for the informal resolution of conflicts, problems, and concerns. Ombudspersons assist visitors by listening to concerns and asking questions, providing information about University policies and procedures, helping to identify and reframe issues, aiding in the identification of goals, helping to generate solution options and action plans, assisting with decision making, coaching visitors to address their concerns with others, serving

² A conversation with the faculty ombudsperson does not constitute notice on behalf of the University of an issue, except when the faculty ombudsperson believes there is an imminent risk of serious harm or is informed of child abuse (see [BOG Rule 1.7](#)). Moreover, the faculty ombudsperson does not constitute a “responsible employee” in accordance with [BOG Rule 1.6](#) and has been designated as a Confidential Resource by the Title IX Coordinator in accordance with [BOG Rule 1.6](#).

as a neutral party in resolving disputes through informal mediation and group facilitation, communicating with others with the permission of the visitor, and making referrals to other resources. Strategies vary based on the concerns presented, context and dynamics of the situation, goals and preferences of the visitor, and discretion of the ombuds.

Standards of Practice

The WVU Faculty Ombudsperson Office adheres to the Standards of Practice and Code of Ethics of the International Ombudsman Association (IOA). Therefore, the Faculty Ombudsperson Office's services are confidential, independent, informal, and neutral. The links below will take readers to comprehensive descriptions of the Standards of Practice on the WVU Faculty Ombudsperson Office website.

[Confidential](#). Communications with the ombuds are held in strict confidence, with the exception of imminent risk of serious harm and child abuse.

[Independent](#). The Faculty Ombudsperson Office is not a part of the University administration.

[Informal](#). The Faculty Ombudsperson Office provides informal conflict resolution assistance for those who voluntarily seek its services.

[Neutral](#). The ombuds does not take sides in any matter.

Activities and Accomplishments for the 2019-2020 Academic Year

From August through September, I spend most of my time building the WVU Faculty Ombudsperson Office and engaging in professional development. I officially began to welcome visitors October 1, 2019.

Hours Served

The ombuds position is contracted to be 25% FTE. During the 9-month (39-weeks) contract period, this would amount to 292.5 hours.

Nevertheless, I spent 820.25 hours, or an average 21.03 hours per week, during the 39-week contract period. Moreover, after the May 15 contract period ended, I spent an additional 121.5 hours on necessary tasks, with the majority of time devoted to producing the annual report.

Building the WVU Faculty Ombudsperson Office

Reestablishing the Faculty Ombudsperson Office required building the infrastructure from the ground up. The following are my major undertakings in this area:

- Wrote the Office Charter and obtained support and approval from necessary parties.
- Secured permission for the Office to be designated as a confidential resource, in accordance with BOG Rule 1.6.
- Developed content for, populated, and launched the WVU Faculty Ombudsperson Office website.
- Designed and built a secure database for gathering de-identified data for purposes of the annual report.
- Prepared the physical office space with furniture, technology, telephone service, etc.
- Worked to keep my ombuds and faculty positions separate; with separate offices, email addresses, and telephone numbers. I also removed myself from duties that involve advocacy and faculty evaluation.

Professional Development

I engaged in many valuable professional development activities this year. These activities helped me to broaden and deepen my knowledge and skills needed for effective ombudsperson practice. They also helped me develop internal and external networks to draw on in service to the ombuds role.

- Successfully completed two in-person IOA training courses; Foundations Course (3-days) and Core Mediation Course (2-days).
- Participated in monthly phone calls with a mentor provided by the IOA.
- Developed a professional network of ombudspeople from other universities, nonprofits, and businesses.

- Developed knowledge of the ombudsperson profession and practice through self-study, engagement in virtual meetings and discussion boards hosted by the IOA and Emerging Ombuds Network, and conversations with individual ombudspeople in my network.
- Expanded my knowledge of WVU policies, procedures, and structures through extensive searching and reading and meetings with administrators and staff from Talent and Culture, Diversity Equity and Inclusion, General Counsel, Internal Audit, Faculty and Staff Assistance Program, Office of the Provost, and other WVU offices.
- Developed an internal network by meeting with WVU administrators, staff, and other colleagues.

I registered for the annual conference of the IOA and a third training course, scheduled for early spring. Unfortunately, the conference and training session were canceled due to COVID-19.

Outreach Activities

I shared information about the ombudsperson profession, my role, and the operation of my Office in conversations with a variety of individuals and groups:

- Talent and Culture
- Diversity Equity and Inclusion
- General Counsel
- Internal Audit
- Office of the Provost
- Faculty and Staff Assistance Program
- Faculty Senate Wellness Committee chair
- Women’s Leadership Initiative. This was an invited, formal presentation, attended by faculty and staff leaders.
- A taskforce
- Small number of academic leaders
- An academic department

My outreach to faculty groups was limited this year by my efforts build the Office and professional development activities. The campus closing in mid-March due to the COVID-19 pandemic also restricted outreach activities.

Assisting Visitors

The primary role of ombudspeople is to assist those who seek our services. My efforts to reestablish the Office and develop requisite knowledge and skills were essential for helping faculty members to manage and resolve their conflicts and concerns effectively. These efforts prepared me to serve visitors in accordance with the IOA Standards of Practice and Code of Ethics (i.e., independence, confidentiality, informality, neutrality).

The remainder of the Annual Report is devoted to presenting information regarding the utilization of the Faculty Ombudsperson Office and the concerns raised by visitors. Data are presented in aggregate form, to protect confidentiality and safeguard the identity of individuals and groups. The report concludes with recommendations for the WVU community.

Office Utilization

Numbers of Visitors and Cases

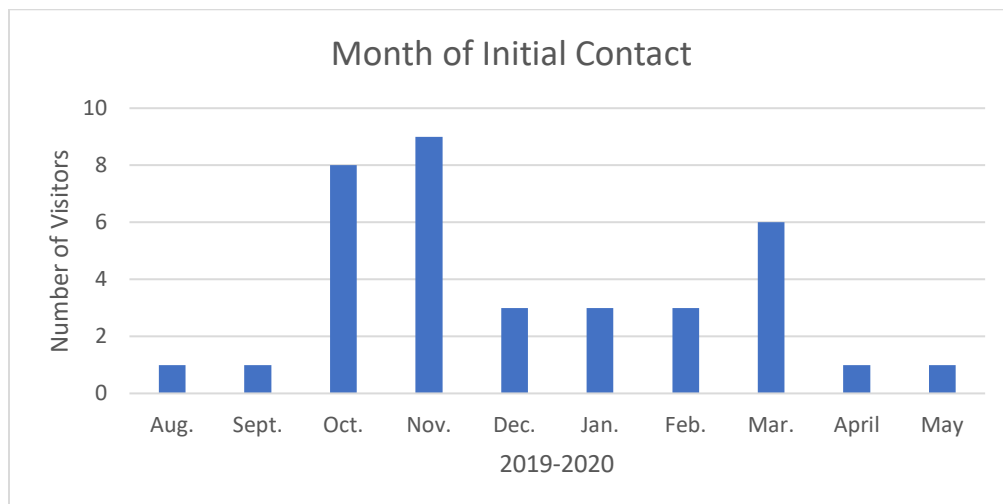
Thirty-six faculty visitors sought ombudsperson services during the current reporting period. Several visitors sought services a second time for distinct concerns. It is standard practice to count repeat visitors as new visitors, because ombudspeople do not maintain identifying records. Most of the 36 visitors are different individuals.

A case may involve a single visitor or a group of visitors, with shared or initially conflicting concerns. The 36 visitors comprised 29 distinct cases. Twenty-five cases involved individual visitors, and four cases included groups of two (3 cases) and five (1 case) visitors.

An additional 10 individuals contacted me who are not faculty members. I gathered information about services available and connected these people with others in the University for assistance. I spent a total of approximately 8 hours assisting these individuals. This group represents 23% of the people who contacted me for assistance, and speaks to the desire and need for ombudsperson services for other campus community groups. The information presented in the remainder of this report includes faculty visitors only.

The number of faculty visitors who contacted me for assistance varied by month. The increase from September to October marks the official October 1 opening. Several visitors told me they remembered the date and had been waiting to contact me. Others said the opening was perfect timing for them. The lower numbers in December and January may have been due to demands that come with the ends and beginnings of semesters and the winter break.

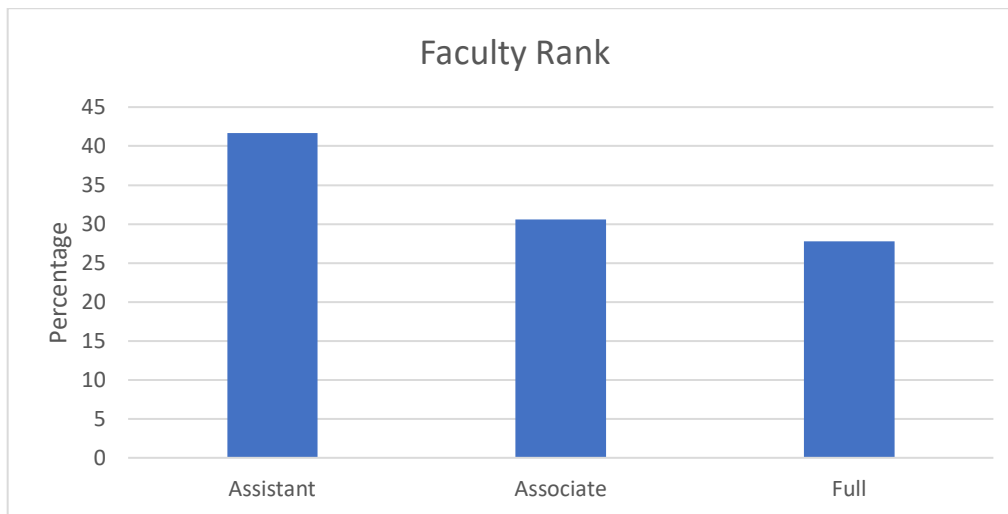
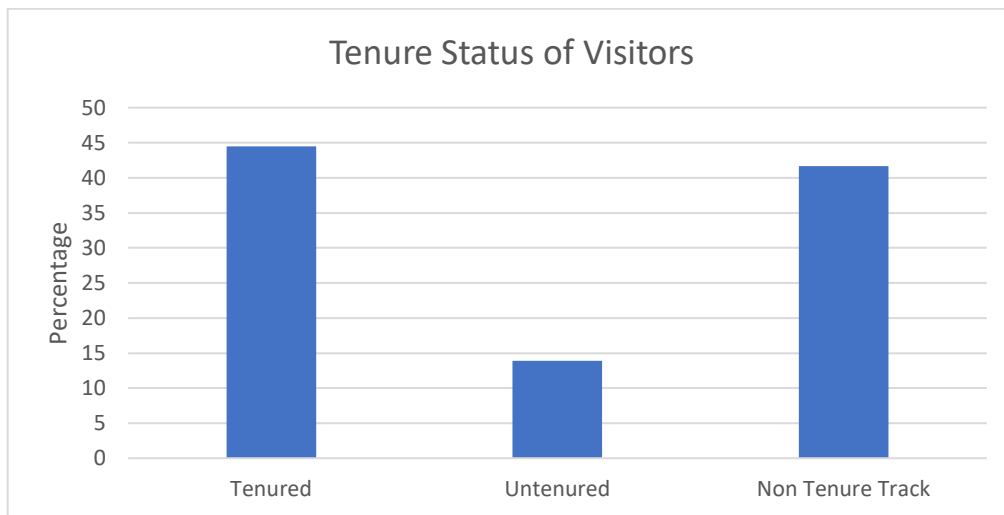
My case load decreased significantly after campus was closed due to COVID-19, when faculty members were focusing on moving their classes online and acclimating to working from home. I emailed deans and department chairs to offer to attend virtual department and college meetings and to ask them to remind their faculty of my services. This had limited impact. In conversations with ombudspeople from other universities, I found many had similar decreases in the numbers of faculty visitors.



Tenure Status and Faculty Rank

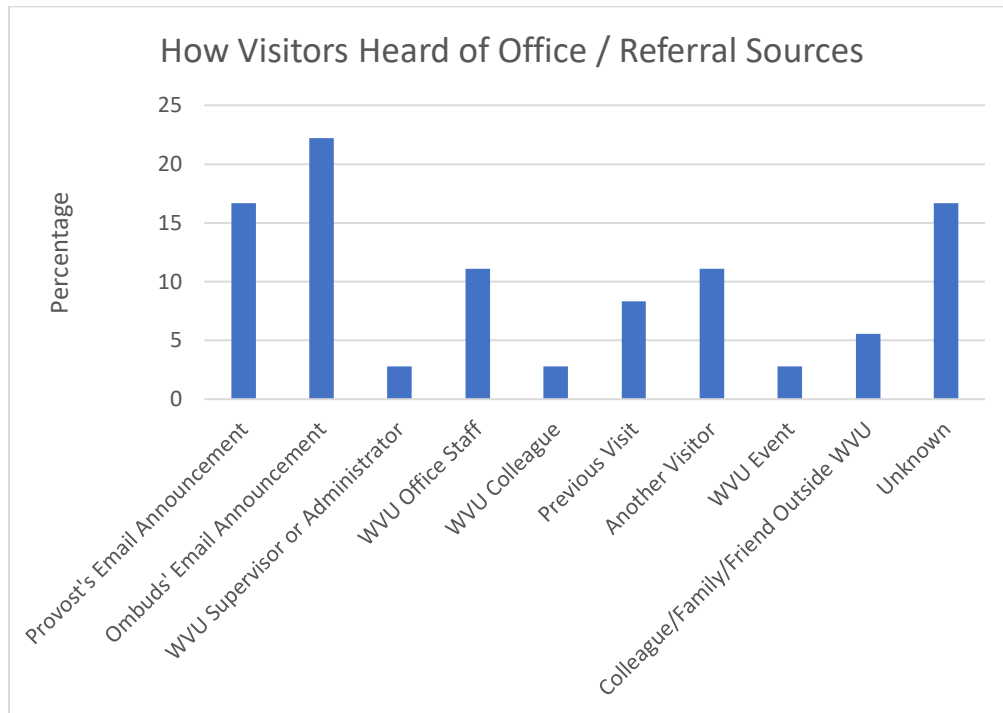
College, department/division, and campus information is excluded from this report for reasons of confidentiality and anonymity. However, I can report visitors to the Office came from a wide range of colleges and departments across WVU.

Visitors represent a mix of tenured, untenured, and non-tenure track faculty at assistant, associate, and full professor ranks. Several visitors held administrative positions, but most visitors were not in faculty supervisory roles.



Referral Sources

Visitors became aware of and were referred to the WVU Faculty Ombudsperson Office through a variety of sources. The impact of announcements early on and the repeat visitors and referrals are encouraging, especially given the relatively recent reopening of the Office. The “unknown” category represents visitors I did not remember to ask, especially earlier in my tenure.



Case Involvement

Visitors and I were usually able to meet very soon after they contacted me. I met with six visitors and assisted two others through email the day they contacted me and met with 14 the next business day. Other initial meetings were delayed by visitors' schedules or my week-long travel for IOA training programs.

The number of face-to-face and telephone meetings, total time spent assisting visitors, and the lengths of engagements varied based on the needs and wishes of each visitor. Although many engagements involved only one meeting to assist a visitor in clarifying issues, interests, and options, most involved gathering additional information on policies, practices, and other items and follow-up contacts and additional discussions with the visitor. Follow-up was primarily through telephone calls and email, and several involved additional face to face meetings. Email was used judiciously and when preferred by the visitor. I deleted all email exchanges when they were no longer needed to assist a visitor.

	Mean (sd)	Median	Minimum	Maximum
Days from contact to first meeting	1.45 (1.65)	1	0	7
Number of face-to-face and telephone meetings ^a	2.28 (2.36)	1	0	10
Email exchanges ^a	1.19 (1.74)	1	0	9
Time spent assisting (hours)	3.32 (2.37)	2.46	0.17	8.58
Length of engagement (days)	21.22 (27.94)	7	1	104

^a Excludes emails and phone calls for scheduling meetings and other brief contacts.

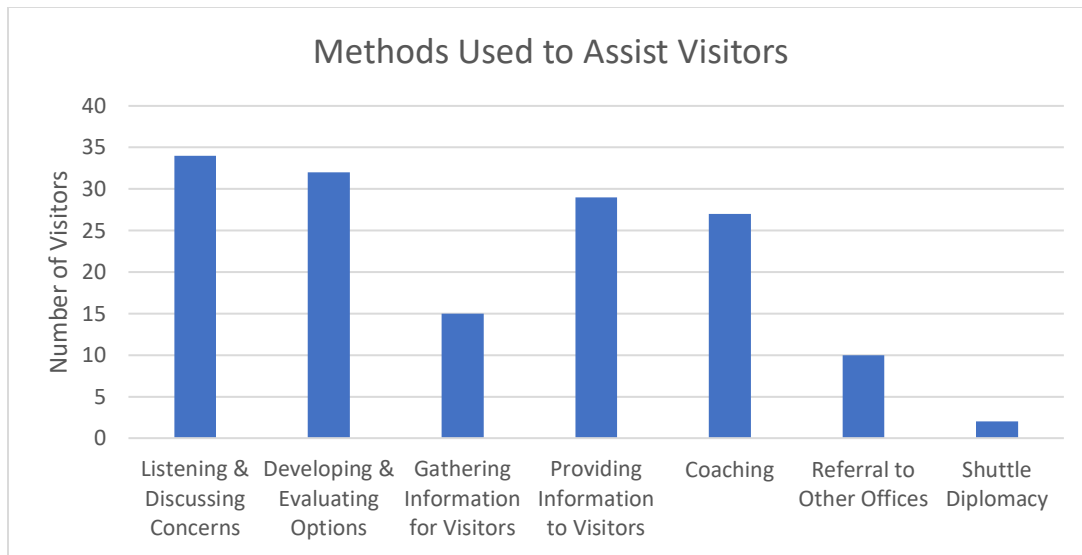
Methods Used to Assist Visitors

Working with an ombudsperson is a collaborative process. Time is taken to get to the heart of the matter, as an ombudsperson actively listens to concerns and helps to identify the interests of parties, reframe issues, and generate and weigh options for resolving conflict. Visitors remain in control of the process, while the ombudsperson helps them consider various angles. Visitors are free to take actions of their choosing or no action at all. Ombudspeople provide opportunities for visitors to talk openly, in confidence, and without judgement and to gather information needed to make informed decisions. Being heard and respected are of utmost important to visitors.

An ombudsperson can assist visitors in a variety of ways. Methods vary depending on the situation at hand and the needs and wishes of the visitor. A number of visitors told me they found it helpful just to hear themselves speak out loud about their concerns, talk through their concerns and options, and obtain information about policies and practices. When I gathered information from others for a visitor, I did so only with the visitor's permission. Occasionally, visitors asked me to disclose their identities to gather visitor-specific information or to facilitate connection with others able to provide assistance.

It is usually desirable to begin with lower levels of intervention, unless or until the situation calls for higher levels of involvement. For example, several visitors requested informal mediation initially, but after talking things through, decided to address their concerns on their own or with the assistance of colleagues, with some coaching from me. Coaching involved helping visitors think through how to approach difficult conversations, strategies for managing possible challenges, approaches for identifying common interests, questions to ask, and additional information to collect. Higher levels of intervention were used infrequently this year. I engaged in some shuttle diplomacy, and I did not conduct informal mediation.

Typically, multiple methods are used, and approaches can change as circumstances evolve. Also, the actions visitors take often change over time, as they try different conflict management strategies and revisit their options. For example, several visitors who were initially reluctant to initiate difficult conversations with other parties to a conflict or to request assistance from colleagues or leaders decided to do so later on.



Resolution of Concerns

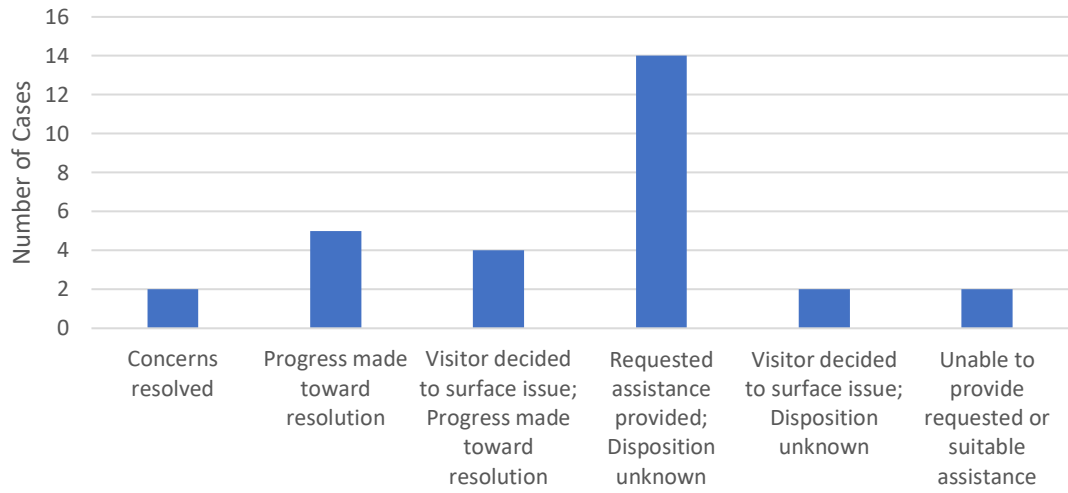
Consistent with the [Charter of the WVU Faculty Ombudsperson Office](#), I closed cases when they were resolved, visitors indicated they did not need further assistance, I determined I was unable to provide further assistance, or after one-month of inactivity.

Ombudspersons often do not know whether or to what extent conflicts were resolved. Experienced ombudspersons recommend against contacting visitors to inquire about outcomes after cases have been closed. Ombudsperson services are entirely voluntary, and further contact should be the choice of the visitor.

In 11 of the 29 cases, I was aware conflicts were resolved or partially resolved. For approximately half of all cases, I provided needed assistance, but I have no information about the degree to which conflicts were resolved. Most of these visitors expressed their appreciation for the assistance, told me they found it valuable, and were taking action consistent with our deliberations. There were two cases in which I was limited in what I was able to do to help because the request was outside the purview of an ombudsperson, or I was unable to figure out how to help the visitor.

In six cases, visitors decided to surface their concerns with college or University leaders, who provided substantive assistance with conflict resolution. Some visitors had requested assistance from leaders before contacting me. Other visitors were reluctant to do so initially and changed their minds as they considered and tried other options. At the time of case closure, I was aware that progress had been made toward conflict resolution in four of the cases.

Resolution Status at End of Engagement



Workplace Concerns and Observations

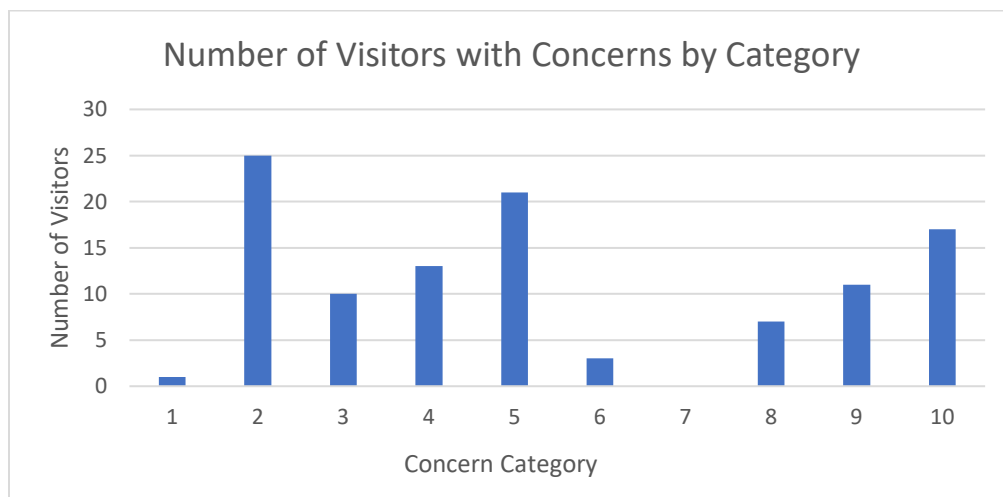
My intention is to provide information and analysis to promote positive change and continuous improvement. Conflict occurs in all organizations, and people seek assistance from ombudspople for support in addressing conflicts and other concerns. While my analysis necessarily focuses on problems, progress was made in resolving many of the concerns visitors brought to my office. Furthermore, a number of visitors were encouraged by the willingness of leaders to listen and provide assistance and by opportunities to rely on supportive colleagues.

I observed similar concerns in variety of units across WVU. Most reported concerns are not unique to any specific unit; nor are they unique to WVU. Ombudspople from other organizations report similar problems. Moreover, there are substantial bodies of academic research in the organizational sciences examining the types of issues brought to my office.

Summary of Concerns Raised

Faculty members may seek assistance from the Faculty Ombudsperson Office about any concern associated with their work lives at WVU, and visitors often disclosed several related problems and underlying issues. The figure below depicts the frequency with which concerns were raised in each of 10 categories. In the table that follows, I labeled the numbered categories and reported on the most frequently raised concerns, along with some less frequent, but significant concerns. I made every effort to categorize concerns based on the perspectives of the visitors.

I based the categorization scheme on the [IOA Uniform Reporting Categories](#), which I revised to better fit the types of concerns brought by faculty constituents. This is a rather simplistic way of representing the complex problems visitors experience. Nonetheless, it provides a summary of the visitors' concerns, while maintaining anonymity and confidentiality. Anonymity and confidentiality also are supported by including various parties of concern in a category. For example, downward evaluative relationships may involve faculty, staff, graduate students, post-doctoral fellows, residents, and/or interns supervised.



Concern Categories		Issues Raised (frequency) ^a
1.	Compensation and benefits	Compensation (1)
2.	Upward evaluative relationships (department/division chair, assistant/associate chair, and unit managed)	Inequity of treatment (20); lack of trust and integrity (19); undesirable unit climate and norms (18); differences in beliefs, values, priorities (16); degree of respect shown to visitor and/or others (16); troubling diversity-related comments and behaviors (12); inequity or lack of transparency in performance evaluations (11); fears of retaliation (10); policy implementation (9); supervisor effectiveness (9); disciplinary action (6); bullying, verbal abuse (6); policies absent or in need of revision (3); retaliatory behavior (3)
3.	Downward evaluative relationships (faculty, staff, undergraduate students, graduate students, post-docs, residents, interns supervised)	Lack of trust and integrity (8); respect shown to visitor or others (8); formal or informal complaint made about visitor (6); possible damage to reputation of visitor (6); undesirable climate and norms in unit or program (5); possible damage to unit or program (5), differences in beliefs, values, priorities (5), concerns about own effectiveness as a supervisor (5); bullying, verbal abuse from supervisees (4)
4.	Colleague (other faculty, staff) relationships	Lack of trust and integrity (8); differences in beliefs, values, priorities (8); level of respect shown for visitor and/or others (7); bullying, verbal abuse (3); equity of treatment in performance evaluation (3) or other situations (3); formal or informal complaints about visitor (3), fears about damage to reputation (3); policy implementation (3)
5.	Career progression and development	Contract/position insecurity (8), fears of termination/non-renewal (10), worries about promotion and/or tenure (9), limited career opportunities (7), voluntary (4) or involuntary work assignment changes (2), contract ambiguity (2)
6.	Legal, regulatory, and financial compliance	Harassment (1), discriminatory behavior (1), other (1)
7.	Safety, health, and physical environment	None
8.	Administrative services (University)	Responsiveness/timeliness (5) behavior of decision-maker (5), policy implementation, decision outcomes (4)
9.	Organization and upper-level leadership (University, college, centralized center)	Bases for decision-making, policies, and practices (8), power dynamics (6)
10.	Policies and procedures (University, college, centralized center)	Implementation of (8), need for revision (7), absence of (4) written policies and procedures

^a Concerns are categorized based on the perspectives of the visitors.

Observations

The following observations are based on the perspectives of visitors, others I contacted in service to the ombuds role, and my professional judgment. Ombudspersons do not conduct investigations to verify what visitors tell them, and I was not privy to the perspectives of other parties to a conflict much of the time. Ombudsperson practice relies on the good faith of visitors and others with whom the ombudsperson communicates. In my experience, the vast majority of visitors were open to considering the perspectives of other parties, distinguishing between positions and interests, searching for common ground, and the mutually beneficial resolution of conflicts.

There is a great deal of variance in the frequency with which visitors raised concerns across and within the 10 concern categories. The most common concerns involved direct supervisors (Category 2), followed by concerns about career progression and development (Category 5) and higher-level policies and procedures (Category 10). Multiple parties were involved in many situations, even though department/division leadership was the most frequent party of concern.

Across these and other categories, a pattern emerged involving incivility; lack of trust; and concerns with policies, procedures, and their implementation. The interpersonal difficulties visitors experienced often stemmed from the manner in which policies were executed, insufficient transparency in decisions-making, and behavioral norms in their units.

Incivility was manifest in troubling comments and behaviors directed at visitors, colleagues, and/or other parties. Visitors experienced and witnessed incivility in individual, group, and unit meetings and through email exchanges between individuals and groups. There were concerns about shouting, dismissive and disparaging comments, spreading misinformation, and showing disrespect for particular individuals and groups (e.g., position type, field, demographic group). Such actions were interpreted as undermining productivity, career progression, and relationships and as bullying and verbal abuse. Many visitors felt they were not being heard by supervisors, colleagues, or others. More pervasive incivility was attributed to unit norms that encourage or tolerate incivility and the forming of factions. As a result, some colleagues seemed to be resigned to the behavior and preferred to try to avoid or ignore the conflict.

Mistrust was conveyed in many of the reported concerns, including retaliatory behavior and fears of retaliation for speaking up or otherwise attempting to address problems. Several visitors expressed concerns higher-ups would be unable to protect faculty from retaliation. Visitors were concerned about the actions of others damaging their reputations with leaders, colleagues, or supervisees. Inequity or lack of transparency about formal performance evaluations conducted by supervisors, colleagues, and supervisees (e.g., SEIs); informal feedback; and formal and informal complaints and the handling of complaints were indicative of mistrust.

Some visitors expressed doubts about their effectiveness as supervisors because of inadequate training and difficulties supervising faculty, graduate students, and others. Visitors were concerned about their supervisory skills and experiences with incivility, negative feedback and complaints, supervisee performance, and other problems. Potential damage to units and programs also was of concern.

Most visitors had questions about University, college, and/or department/division policies and procedures. I gathered information for visitors, answered questions, and pointed visitors to specific written materials. Knowledge of policies and procedures was helpful for visitors as they considered their concerns and explored their options. In some instances, policy and procedure information was enough to satisfy visitors' concerns, and in other cases it helped to confirm or disconfirm beliefs about discrepancies between policies and practices or identify the absence of and gaps in written documentation.

The implementation of multiple types of policies and procedures were of concern to many visitors. The concerns fostered lack of trust in the system and in individuals and groups of decision makers. Chief among these was performance assessment in promotion, tenure, annual evaluation, and reappointment procedures. For example, concerns were raised about imprecise criteria and difficulty using written policies for guidance as faculty members progress through their WVU careers, especially when coupled with insufficient guidance and feedback from chairs. Fear of contract nonrenewal was another commonly reported concern, driven in part by the absence of nonrenewal criteria for non-tenure track positions. Furthermore, insufficient transparency in performance evaluation, hiring, work assignments, and other areas contributed to uncertainty and perceptions of procedural injustice. Visitors often felt they did not have the information required to understand how various types of decisions were made.

Conflict avoidance was mentioned by several visitors and could explain some of the actions visitors were concerned about. For example, annual evaluation and promotion and tenure advice and letters may be intentionally vague because decision-makers believe transparency will lead to conflict. An academic program coordinator or department/division chair may be inclined side a student in a dispute with a faculty member because this is perceived as easier than working toward conflict resolution with both parties. A department/division chair may be disinclined to get involved in conflicts among department members in hopes the problems will resolve themselves or because she/he feels ill-equipped to manage the conflict or change entrenched norms. These are just a few of many conflict avoidance scenarios that may occur. Unfortunately, conflict avoidance often leads to escalation of existing conflicts and to additional conflicts.

Recommendations

The following recommendations are based on my work with visitors and what I learned about WVU policies, procedures, and practices from multiple sources. I brought some of the concerns and recommendations to University officials already, while ensuring visitors could not be identified, unless given expressed permission to do so by a visitor.

Ongoing Efforts by WVU Administration

A number of initiatives have been undertaken by the administration to improve the WVU work environment and culture and to provide additional resources for faculty. Dr. Melissa Latimer was appointed to a new associate provost position, focused on faculty development and culture. Among other initiatives, she and the Teaching and Learning Commons have been collaborating to provide additional training and development opportunities for faculty. The WVU Faculty Senate worked with the Office of the Provost to reinstate the Faculty Ombudsperson Office. Updates to the [WVU Faculty](#) website have eased access to University and college policies and procedures and teaching, research, and other documentation and resources.

Campus Conversations have addressed campus carry legislation, the VSIP retirement incentive, campus culture, and other topics. The Office of the President and Office of the Provost have been communicating frequently through email and virtual Campus Conversations to keep faculty and staff updated on COVID-19 and return to campus preparations. I understand some faculty members are included on return to campus committees. It would be helpful to inform the faculty about whom is representing faculty interests, how, and on which committees; the roles faculty members play on the committees and in decision-making; and how other faculty members can have a voice in return to campus plans at the University level and in their colleges and departments/divisions.

Additionally, an existing committee may benefit from my perspective as an ombuds, or leadership might consider establishing a workplace improvement committee. The focus of a workplace improvement committee would be on continuous improvement; promoting fairness in policies, procedures, and practices; and resolving conflicts constructively and effectively.

Managing Conflict

As discussed in the Observations section, conflict avoidance may contribute to some problems experienced by faculty members. Conflict avoidance can prolong problems, lead to conflict escalation, and increase the likelihood of future conflicts. Also, conflict escalation can sneak up on us, which makes timely conflict management all the more important.

People may avoid conflict for many reasons, for instance, lack of knowledge and skill about conflict management, prior negative experiences, organizational norms, pervasive incivility, or mistrust. People may delay efforts to manage conflicts because of sincere beliefs things will get better. It is important to determine why particular people and groups are avoiding conflict before choosing an intervention. For example, training is called for only when knowledge and skills are

deficient. Also, training programs are likely to be ineffective for changing behavior if they are not designed properly or the content is invalid.

It is helpful for individuals at all levels to reflect on the ways in which they respond to conflict, examine when and why they may engage in conflict avoidance, and assess the effectiveness of their conflict management strategies. It also is advantageous for program coordinators, department/division chairs, and higher-level leaders to be aware of and attend to conflicts in their programs and units and provide support and other assistance when needed. I am available to faculty members, including those with administrative duties, to help with diagnosing the causes of conflict and for conflict coaching and other conflict management assistance.

Reducing and Preventing Incivility

Steps such as setting expectations and ground rules for meetings, email exchanges, and other communications can be effective for preventing incivility. Additionally, failure to respond to incivility when it occurs may be interpreted as tacit approval. Responding professionally, calmly, and firmly can be an effective way to stop the behavior and make clear the behavior is unacceptable. Additional steps may be needed if the behavior continues or escalates, for example, asking the person to leave a meeting or ending a meeting.

Witnesses may need support to motivate them to respond, particularly when unit norms reinforce inappropriate behavior or discourage speaking up. Bystanders may fear retaliation, ostracism, or other negative consequences or may believe responding will be ineffective. Senior faculty members and leaders have an important role to play, particularly to support colleagues who have less power and to foster constructive norms. Those who have concerns about speaking up are welcome to seek my assistance. Also, bystander training may be an effective option.

Following up with targets of incivility to lend assistance and working with those who display incivility to correct the problem are recommended. When incivility is exhibited by a department/division chair or another person in power, senior faculty and/or higher-level leaders may need to step in.

It can be difficult to balance supervisory discretion with oversight to ensure fair treatment of faculty members. Nevertheless, it is important for college leaders to work with department/division chairs and faculty members to identify and diagnose the causes of particular problems and to intervene when necessary. It also is important to build trust with faculty members, so they feel comfortable going to college and department leaders for assistance and learn how leaders will work to prevent and respond to retaliation. As I noted earlier, some visitors surfaced their concerns with leaders. However, others remained reluctant doing so.

Building and Restoring Trust

Trust in leaders, colleagues, and supervisees is fundamental for healthy work environments, constructive relationships, and effective conflict management and resolution.

The following are recommended for promoting trust:

Communication. It is helpful for individuals to reflect on how they communicate verbally and in writing, consider the perceptions of and effects on recipients of their communications, and work to improve as needed. For example, truthful feedback from colleagues, department/division chairs, and others about a faculty member's performance and preparedness for promotion and tenure, discretionary promotion, and contract renewal are important. It is not easy to deliver negative feedback, but it can be delivered honestly and with kindness. Constructive feedback also can reduce the likelihood or severity of future conflict, particularly when developmental feedback and helpful guidance are given along the way.

Decision-making. Reflecting on how decisions and decision-making processes are likely to impact others is an important first step in developing and maintaining sound and fair practices. Stakeholders tend to want ample information about decision-making and other processes, including who has decision authority, roles of different people and groups in the process, decision criteria, how the process will ensure criteria will be applied fairly, and when decisions will be made. It is most effective to provide process information in advance; however, additional information about the reasoning behind decision outcomes is likely to be needed afterward. Transparency and fairness promote procedural justice and trust, and answers that do not ring true breed mistrust.

Participation in decision-making. Opportunities for meaningful participation in decision-making tend to be valued. Examples include, welcoming, soliciting, listening to, and incorporating input from those who have a stake in changes and outcomes and those with expertise. Granting authority to faculty members to make the decisions, update existing or develop new policies and procedures, and take other action can further trust. Trust is often reciprocated, and exhibiting trust in others can advance mutual trust.

Consistency. Consistency between words and actions and in the treatment of others are important for building trust.

Competence. Demonstrating competence and a sincere willingness to develop knowledge and skills furthers trust.

Conflict management. Addressing problems early, directly, and effectively also impacts trust.

While it is challenging to restore trust once breached, it is worth the effort. Gaining an understanding of how trust was breached, along with many of the strategies above can be helpful for restoring trust. Like any conflict, failure to address loss of trust can be detrimental.

Policy Implementation

A number of concerns were raised about the implementation of written policies and procedures by administrators, colleagues, and supervisees (broadly defined). Transparency and the purposeful management of implementation processes are beneficial. Many of the recommendations for building trust and managing conflict apply here as well.

Keeping track of how policies are implemented and reviewing practices regularly is valuable, along with figuring out why policies are not followed consistently or correctly. For example, policies may be unclear or open to too much interpretation, people may disagree with a policy or particular parts of a policy, or biases may be operating consciously or implicitly. Diagnosing causes is necessary for choosing appropriate actions.

Policy Gaps

While BOG Rule 1.6 clearly addresses faculty-student romantic relationships, there are no guidelines for other types student-faculty relationships. For example, faculty may hire students for yard work, babysitting, and house and pet sitting. Guidance on the conditions under which these types of relationships are acceptable would be helpful for faculty.

Additionally, it is important ensure all units that employ faculty members have written promotion, tenure, annual evaluation, reappointment, and academic program policies. The absence of such policies can lead to ambiguous expectations; uncertainty about evaluation criteria; and difficulties declining requests to take on new service, teaching, or other responsibilities.

Investigation Procedures

Detailed investigation procedures are readily available online for audits performed by the Internal Audit Office and investigations conducted by the Division of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion. Documented procedures such as these reduce uncertainty when employees are facing formal complaints and the possibility of disciplinary action. Just and transparent investigation procedures also promote perceptions of procedural justice, which can improve employee relations and cooperation of respondents and witnesses.

I recommend analogous procedures be made public for investigations conducted by Employee Relations, academic units and programs, and other entities in which investigations of formal and informal complaints are conducted. It is possible written procedures exist and simply have not been made public.

Additionally, I am aware those under investigation by some offices are not informed of their rights under the respective policies. For example, Employee Relations staff do not inform respondents they are permitted have a representative or other party present during questioning, unless respondents explicitly ask. Informing respondents of their rights under University policies is likely to positively impact perceptions of due process and procedural justice and trust in people and systems.

As mentioned previously, a number of visitors had fears of retaliation or believed they were retaliated against for speaking out or otherwise trying to address a variety of problems in their work units. Also, concerns that leaders would be unable to protect faculty from retaliation were clear. These concerns may be alleviated by communicating with faculty about actions leadership is taking or will take to prevent retaliation and to respond to claims of retaliation.

Knowledge, Skill, and Support Needs

Several potential areas for faculty development were brought to my attention. First, it would be helpful for leadership to examine the need for and interest in mentoring or training for faculty members who assume leadership roles, such as academic program coordinators and course coordinators who supervisor graduate student instructors. These positions require many of the same management skills needed for other types of administrative positions (e.g., decision-making, conflict management, motivating others, organizing, strategic thinking).

Leadership may wish to consider making supervisor development activities mandatory. These could take the form of formal training, mentoring, coaching, and other development activities, depending on needs and potential efficacy. Developmental activities could be provided in-house or externally, contingent on financial resources and subject matter expertise, time, and other internal resources. The skills needed to be a successful faculty member do not necessarily transfer to leadership roles.

Additionally, concerns about racial injustice and how to be an effective ally suggest the need for guidance and resources for designing and managing diversity initiatives in colleges and departments. Individuals also may want knowledge and guidance to support their development and ability to contribute.

Priorities for the 2020-2021 Academic Year

- The top priority will be to focus on requests for ombudsperson services and the needs of individual visitors.
- I intend to conduct outreach, as time allows. Outreach is likely to be limited by the part-time nature of the position.
- I will continue to deepen my understanding of recurring issues and concerns voiced by visitors and others with whom I consult.
- I will continue to engage in professional development activities, as time allows.
- I will continue to follow the Charter of the WVU Faculty Ombudsperson Office and the IOA Standards of Practice and Code of Ethics.

Beyond this coming year, I hope it will be possible to expand the office to allow for more outreach activities, with the goal of reaching and serving greater numbers of faculty members. I also would like to be able to develop and conduct workshops, which is common practice for ombudsperson offices. In addition, the University may wish to consider adding ombudsperson services for staff and other WVU community groups. Additional ombudspeople would be needed to serve additional constituencies.

Conclusion

The WVU Faculty Ombudsperson Office is an independent, confidential, impartial, and informal conflict resolution resource for faculty members, including those in administrative roles. While I do not represent faculty members or the University, advocating for fairness and systemic change is central to this role. In this report, I summarized the concerns brought to me and presented what I observed and learned during the past year. The recommendations serve as a starting point and offer some options for addressing problems that can interfere with individual, group, and organizational effectiveness. Insights gained from this and future reports can be used to inform efforts to address concerns of the WVU faculty.