

THE WVU FACULTY OMBUDSPERSON OFFICE

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

WVU FACULTY OMBUDSPERSON OFFICE ANNUAL REPORT

2020-2021 Academic Year

Prepared and Submitted by
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May 7, 2021

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A Message from the WVU Faculty Ombudsperson

It is an honor to share with you the WVU Faculty Ombudsperson Office Annual Report for the 2020-2021 academic year. 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.

This is the second report in my tenure as the WVU Faculty Ombudsperson, and much of the content of last year's report remains relevant. Rather than repeat this information in the current annual report, I refer the reader to the [2019-2020 Annual Report for the WVU Faculty Ombudsperson Office](#) for an introduction to the Office; my observations regarding the concerns presented to me; and recommendations for department, college, and University leadership. I also invite you to visit the [WVU Faculty Ombudsperson Office website](#) for documentation and additional information, including, for example, standards of practice, the Charter of the WVU Faculty Ombudsperson Office, and FAQ.

During the 2019-2020 academic year, I focused on building the Office from the ground up, engaging in extensive professional development, and otherwise preparing to begin meeting with visitors.¹ I began welcoming visitors October 1, 2019. In the 2020-2021 academic year, my top priority was providing ombudsperson services to visitors. Given the part-time nature of the position (25% FTE for 9-months), I conducted limited outreach and engaged in professional development activities as time allowed.

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

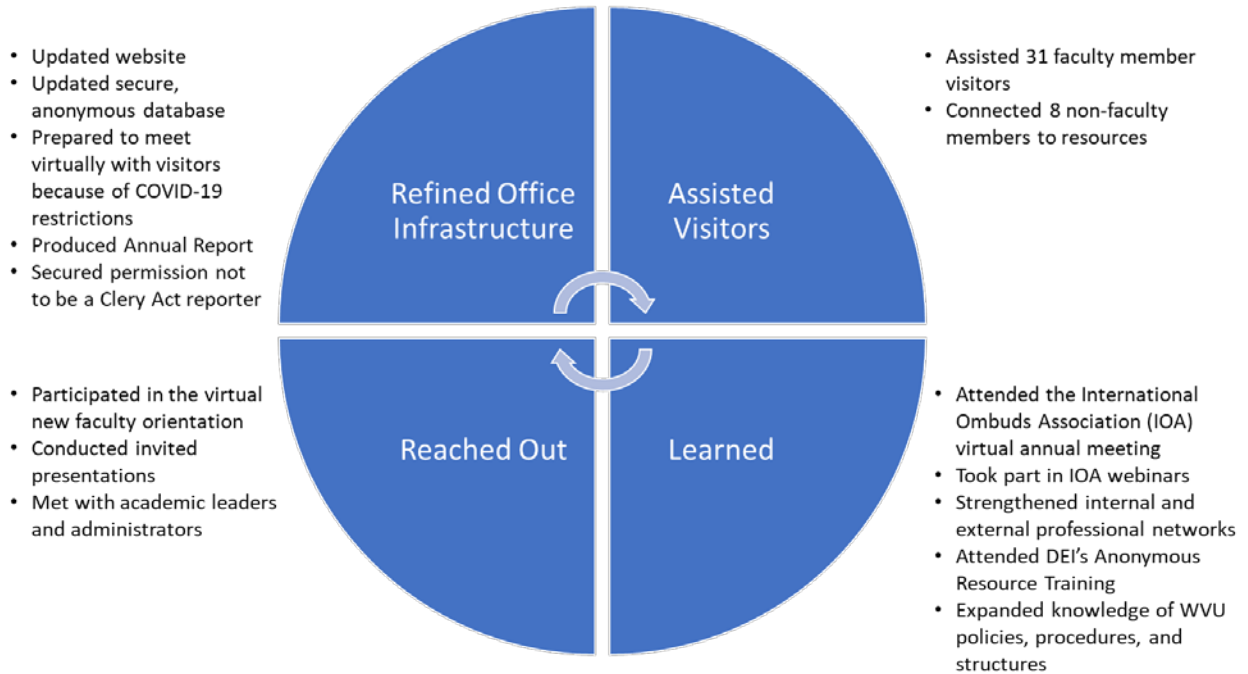
Respectfully Submitted,

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 2020-2021 academic year. Detailed information appears in the body of the Annual Report.



Activities and Accomplishments for the 2020-2021 Academic Year

During the 2020-2021 academic year, I focused my efforts on working with visitors and on associated administrative tasks. The part-time nature of the role (25% FTE for 9-months) restricted my other activities, however, I was able to engage in some activities that supported my efforts to assist visitors.

Refining the Ombudsperson Office Infrastructure

The following are some of my undertakings in this area:

- Secured permission for the Office not to be designated as a reporter under the Clery Act
- Updated the WVU Faculty Ombudsperson Office website
- Refined the secure database for gathering de-identified data for purposes of the annual report
- Prepared office space in my home to meet with visitors remotely
- Continued to work to keep my ombuds and faculty positions separate

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 strengthen internal and external networks to draw on in service to the ombuds role.

- Attended the International Ombuds Association (IOA) virtual annual meeting (3 days)
- Took part in IOA webinars
- Participated in phone calls with a mentor provided by the IOA, as needed
- Strengthened my professional network of ombudspeople from other universities, nonprofits, and businesses
- Continued to develop knowledge of the ombuds 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 searching and reading and conversations with academic leaders and administrators
- Attended DEI's Anonymous Resource Training

Outreach Activities

As mentioned previously, the part-time nature of the Faculty Ombudsperson position restricted my engagement in outreach activities. This is likely to have limited the number of faculty members who are aware of WVU's Faculty Ombudsperson Office and who contacted me for ombuds services.

During the reporting period, I participated in the virtual new faculty orientation, and I shared information about the ombudsperson profession, my role, and the operation of my Office in a formal presentation to an academic department and in meetings with academic leaders and staff.

Assisting Visitors

The primary role of ombudspeople is to assist those who seek our services. My efforts to continue to develop requisite knowledge and skills were essential for helping faculty members to manage and resolve their conflicts and concerns effectively. These efforts further 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.

Office Utilization

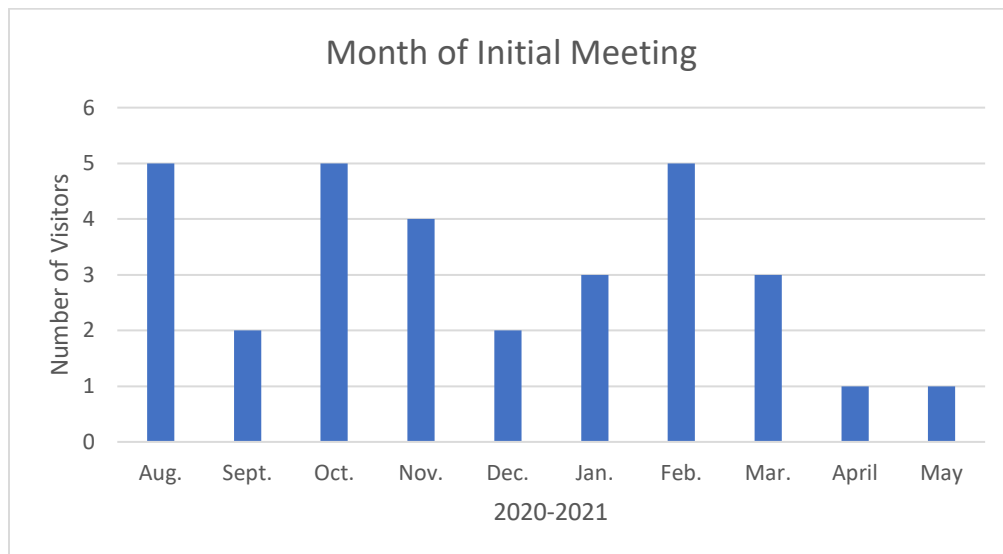
Numbers of Visitors and Cases

Thirty-one faculty visitors sought ombuds services during the current reporting period. Several visitors sought services a second time for ongoing or distinct concerns. It is standard practice to count repeat visitors as new visitors, because ombudspersons do not maintain identifying records. Most of the 31 visitors are different individuals.

A case may involve a single visitor or a group of visitors, with shared or initially conflicting concerns. The 31 visitors comprised 29 distinct cases. Twenty-seven cases involved individual visitors, and two cases included pairs of two visitors with shared concerns.

An additional eight individuals contacted me who are not faculty members. I gathered information about services available and connected these people with other parties for assistance when possible. I also was contacted by a department and an administrator looking into providing ombuds or other types of support for graduate students. I spent a total of approximately two hours assisting these people. They represent 24% of those who contacted me for assistance, which 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.

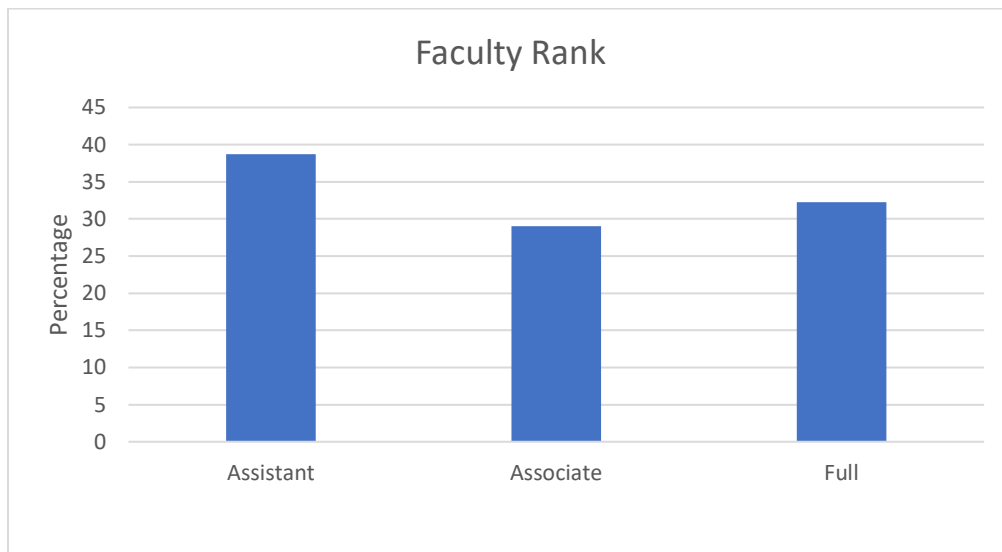
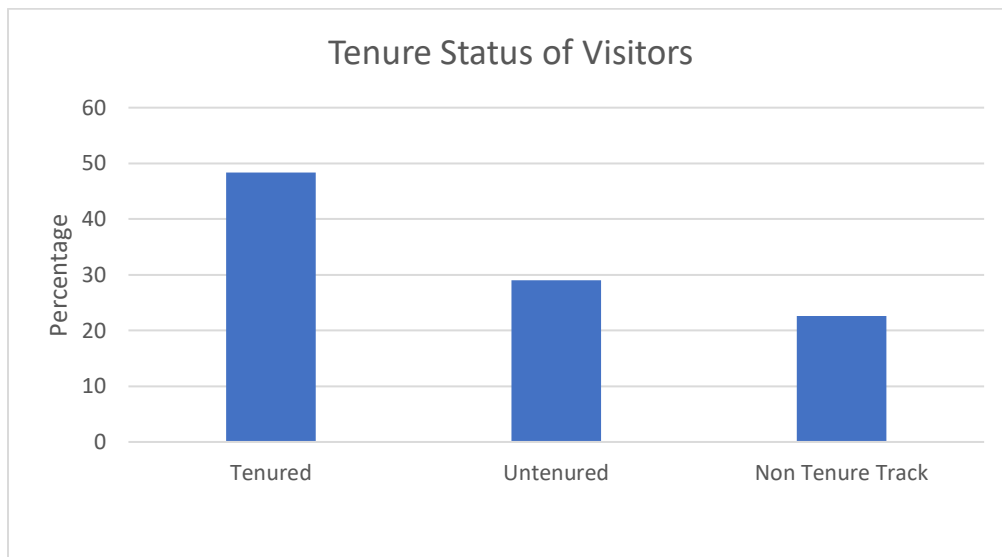
As shown in the figure below, the number of faculty visitors who contacted me for assistance varied by month. The graph covers the period from August 11, 2020 to May 4, 2021.



Tenure Status and Faculty Rank

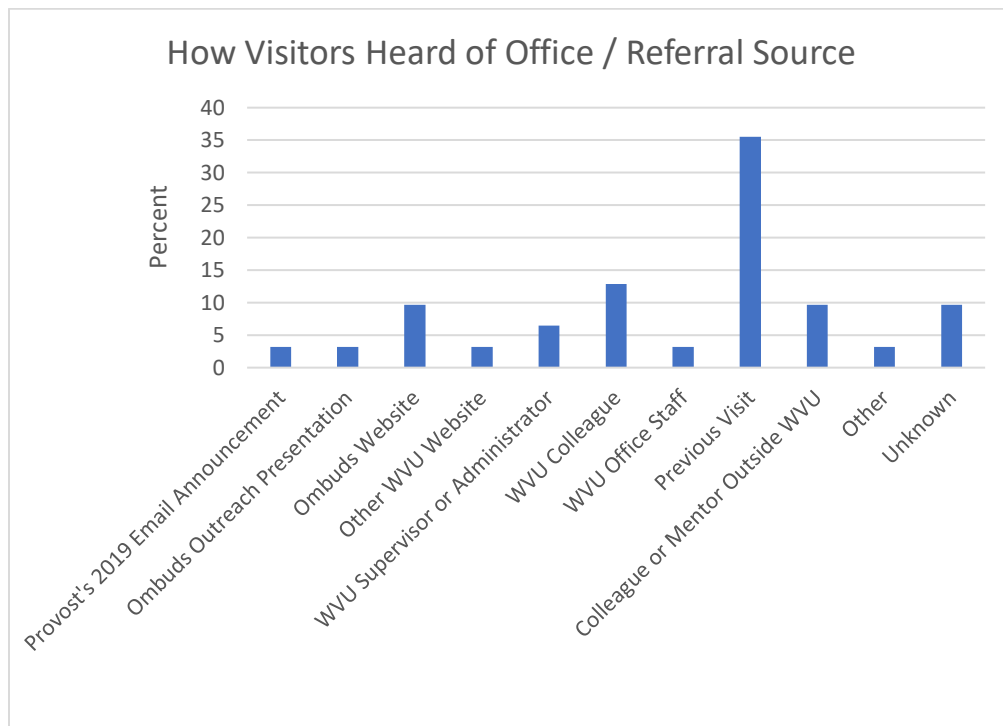
College, department/division, and campus information is excluded from this report for reasons of confidentiality and anonymity. However, I can report visitors to the Office came from a wide range of colleges and departments across WVU.

Visitors represented a mix of tenured, untenured, and non-tenure track faculty members at assistant, associate, and full professor ranks. Thirteen percent of visitors held administrative positions.



Referral Sources

Visitors became aware of and were referred to the WVU Faculty Ombudsperson Office through a variety of sources. Repeat visits from the 2019-2020 academic year or earlier in the current reporting year were the largest single source of visitors to the office. The cumulative percentage of referrals from various sources also is encouraging. The low percentage of visitors from outreach presentations reflects the limited outreach conducted during the reporting period. I conducted outreach mainly as requested because of the 25% FTE nature of the position. The “unknown” category represents visitors I did not remember to ask.



Case Involvement

Visitors and I were usually able to meet very soon after they contacted me. I met with seven visitors the day they contacted me and with 10 the next business day. Other initial meetings were delayed primarily by visitors' schedules.

No face-to-face meetings were conducted because of the COVID-19 pandemic and restrictions. Meeting media (i.e., virtual video conferencing, telephone), the 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 additional virtual 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	1.94 (1.91)	1	0	8
Number of virtual video meetings	1.23 (1.26)	1	0	5
Number telephone meetings ^a	0.55 (1.06)	0	0	5
Email exchanges ^a	0.77 (1.29)	0	0	6
Time spent assisting (hours)	3.63 (3.08)	2.40	0.70	13.82
Length of engagement (days)	16.00 (33.14)	2	1	153

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

Methods Used to Assist Visitors

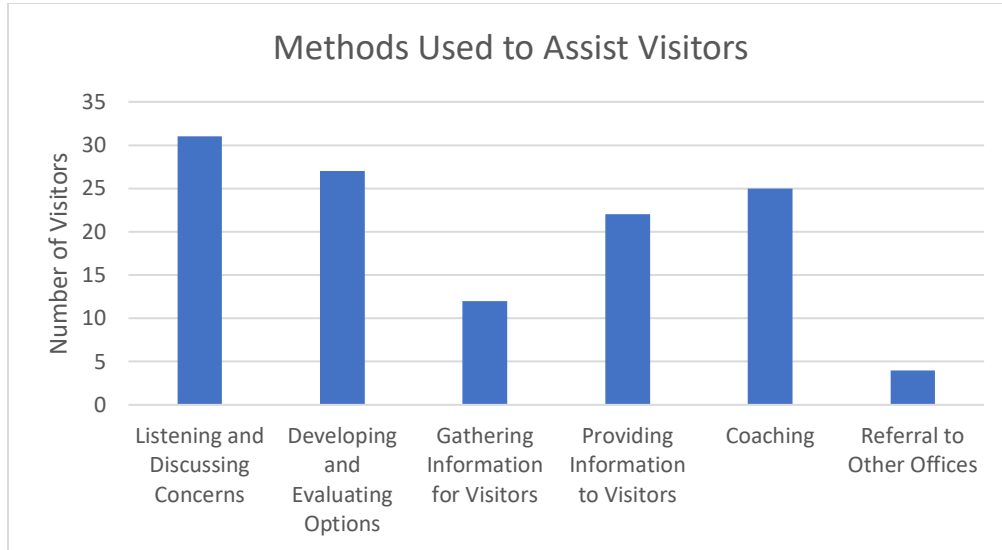
Working with an ombudsperson is a collaborative process. Time is taken to get to the heart of the matter, as an ombudsperson actively listens to concerns and helps to identify the interests of parties, reframe issues, and generate and weigh options for resolving conflict. Visitors remain in control of the process, while the ombudsperson helps them consider various angles. Visitors are free to take actions of their choosing or no action at all. Ombudspersons 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, a visitor may request informal mediation initially, but after talking things through, decide to address their concerns on their own or with the assistance of colleagues or leaders, with some coaching from me. Coaching involves 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 not used this year. For various reasons, I did not conduct shuttled diplomacy or 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

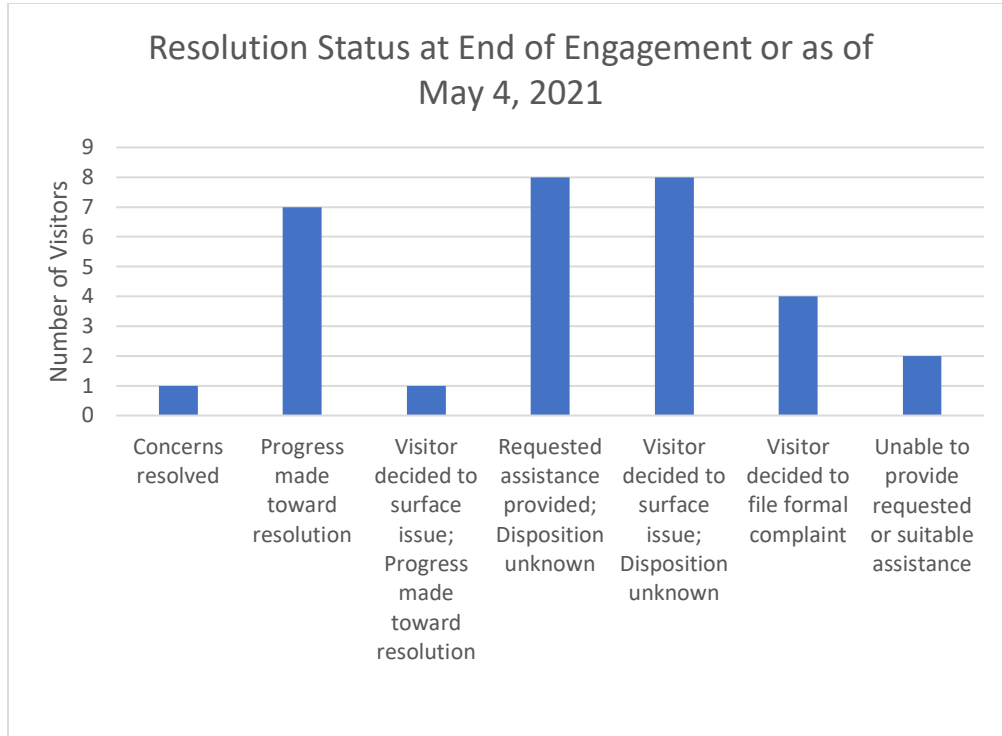
Consistent with the [Charter of the WVU Faculty Ombudsperson Office](#), I closed cases when they were resolved, visitors indicated they did not need further assistance, I determined I was unable to provide further assistance, or after one-month of inactivity.

Ombudspeople often do not know whether or to what extent conflicts were resolved. Experienced ombudspeople 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.

For nine of the 31 visitors, I was aware conflicts were resolved or partially resolved. For most visitors, 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 nine cases, visitors decided to surface their concerns with college or University leaders, who provided 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 one of the cases. Four visitors decided to file formal complaints. These visitors tried to resolve the issues informally on their own, with my

assistance, or in conjunction with leaders before filing formal complaints. Several cases remain open as of the writing of this report. In these cases, I indicated the resolution status as of May 4, 2021.



Workplace Concerns

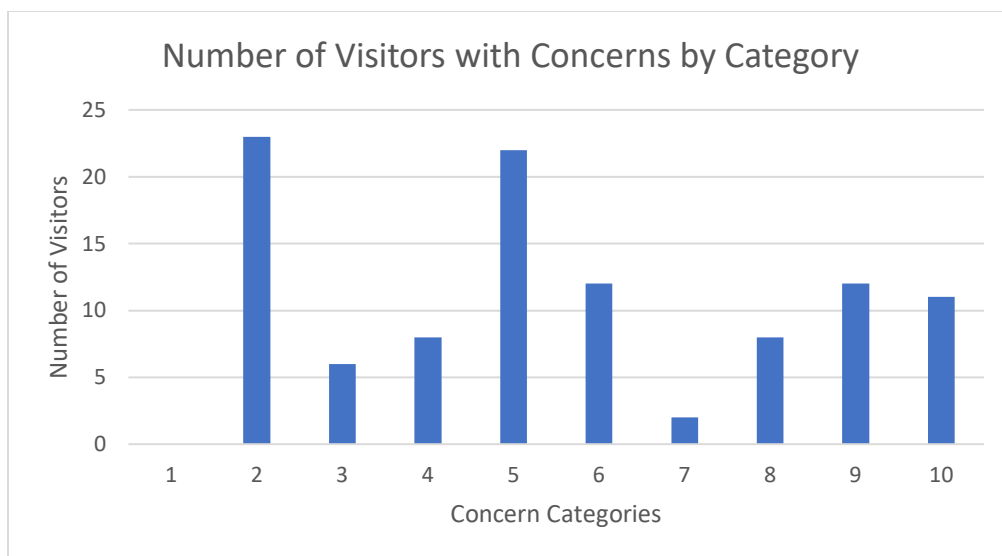
My intention is to provide information to promote positive change and continuous improvement. Conflict occurs in all organizations, and people seek assistance from ombudspeople for support in addressing conflicts and other concerns. While the data necessarily focus on problems, progress was made in resolving many of the concerns visitors brought to my office. Furthermore, a number of visitors were encouraged by the willingness of leaders to listen and try to provide assistance and by opportunities to rely on supportive colleagues. However, others were frustrated by what they perceived to be a lack of ability or willingness of leaders at various levels to help them resolve their concerns.

I observed similar concerns in a variety of units across WVU. Most reported concerns are not unique to any specific unit; nor are they unique to WVU. Ombudspeople 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 the frequencies with which the concerns were raised. 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 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	None
2.	Upward evaluative relationships (department/division chair, assistant/associate chair, and unit managed)	Inequity of treatment (18); trust and integrity (16); beliefs, values, priorities (15); climate, norms in unit (14); power dynamics (13); unable or unwilling to assist (11); performance evaluation of visitor (10); policy implementation (10); fear of retaliation (9); effectiveness of supervisor (8); respect shown to visitor or others (8); bullying, mobbing, verbal abuse (5); feedback, recognition (4); complaint about visitor (3); reputation of visitor or others (3); damage to unit or program (2); policy missing (2); policy in need of revision (2); retaliatory behavior (2); disciplinary action (1)
3.	Downward evaluative relationships (faculty, staff, undergraduate students, graduate students, post-docs, residents, interns supervised)	Bullying, mobbing, verbal abuse (4); respect shown for visitors or others (4); beliefs, values, priorities (3); climate, norms in unit (3); conflict between two or more supervisees (3); damage to unit or program (3); diversity-related comments and behaviors (3); fear of retaliation (3); power dynamics (3); reputation of visitor or others (3); trust, integrity (3); complaint about visitor (2); effectiveness as a supervisor or instructor (2); equity of treatment (2); performance evaluation of visitor (1)
4.	Colleague (other faculty, staff) relationships	Equity of treatment (8); trust, integrity (8); beliefs, values, priorities (5); climate, norms in unit (5); effectiveness of colleagues (5); power dynamics (5); reputation of visitor or others (4); bullying, mobbing, verbal abuse (3); fear of retaliation (3); performance evaluation of visitor (3); policy implementation (3); respect shown to visitor or others (3); conflict between two or more colleagues (2); diversity-related comments and behaviors (2); unable or unwilling to assist (2); complaint about visitor (1); visitor's effectiveness as a department contributor (1); retaliation (1)

5.	Career progression and development	Career progression (tenure, promotion, annual review; 14); involuntary changes in work assignments or role (7); considering resignation from University or role (7); fear of termination, non-renewal (5); contract or position security (4); contract or role ambiguity (2); career opportunities (1); position elimination or fear of (1)
6.	Legal, regulatory, and financial compliance	Lack of or insufficient due process (7); harassment (5); discrimination (4); research integrity, compliance (3); violation reporting (1)
7.	Safety, health, and physical environment	Work-life balance (1); other (1)
8.	Administrative services (University)	Policy clarity (5); responsiveness/timeliness (4); decision outcomes (3); policy implementation (3); unable or unwilling to assist (3); behavior of administrative staff (2); quality of services (2)
9.	Organization and upper-level leadership (University, college, centralized center)	Unable or unwilling to assist (9); bases for decision-making, policies, and practices (3); communication (3); division of labor and decision authority (3); leadership quality, capacity (2); organizational climate, culture (2); power dynamics (2); reporting structure unclear (1); visitor's performance evaluation (1); other (1)
10.	Policies and procedures (University, college, centralized center)	Lack of clarity about what policy is (6); implementation of policy, procedure, standard (5); seeking policy information or clarification (4); lack of policy, procedure, standard (1)

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

Observations and Recommendations

The following observations are based on the perspectives of visitors, others I contacted in service to the ombuds role, and my professional judgment. Ombudspeople 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), organization and upper-level leadership (Category 9), 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.

The observations and recommendations I included last year remain relevant. Rather than repeat those here, I refer the reader to pages 17-23 of the [2019-2020 Annual Report for the WVU Faculty Ombudsperson Office](#). I'll focus here on one issue that affected a number of visitors.

All visitors attempted to address their concerns informally. In many cases they enlisted the assistance of University, college, and/or department leadership, depending on the sources of their concerns. Several visitors reported leadership was willing to assist and some reported early progress. However, oftentimes, these informal avenues failed to resolve issues of concern. Some visitors indicated months would go by without progress or without communication about the informal investigation procedures used or measures taken to try to resolve the problems. Some visitors perceived an inability or unwillingness of leaders to provide the types of assistance needed to resolve their concerns. In some cases, visitors' attempts to address their concerns informally served to prolong and escalate the problems, which eventually led them to file formal complaints.

In the interest of more successful, timely, informal conflict resolution, I recommend leaders at all levels be encouraged and empowered to take action to resolve University, college, and department-level problems in the best interest of concerned parties. Current initiatives need to be bolstered to support leaders with additional tools to manage conflict and correct problems. For example, leaders may need time, funding, training, individualized coaching, additional conflict management services, and/or new or revised policies and procedures to support their efforts. Input from leaders regarding what they need would be valuable. It also is important to hold leaders accountable when they are contributing to the problems in their units.

Priorities for the 2021-2022 Academic Year

- The top priority will be to focus on requests for ombudsperson services and the needs of visitors.
- I intend to conduct outreach, as time allows. Outreach will 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.

I believe it is important to expand the Office to allow for more outreach activities, with the goal of reaching and serving greater numbers of faculty members, including academic leaders. I also would like to be able to keep the Office open over the summer months. This would allow me to continue to work with visitors with open cases at the end of the Spring semester, faculty members who are denied promotion and/or tenure or who received termination letters, and those otherwise in need of ombuds services during the summer months. In addition, I encourage the University to consider adding ombuds services for staff and other WVU community groups.

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. My past and current 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 current, past, and future reports can be used to inform efforts to address concerns of the WVU faculty.