

## THE WVU FACULTY OMBUDSPERSON OFFICE

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

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# WVU FACULTY OMBUDSPERSON OFFICE ANNUAL REPORT

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2021-2022 Academic Year

Prepared and Submitted by  
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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 2021-2022 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 third report in my tenure as the WVU Faculty Ombudsperson, and much of the content of my previous reports remains relevant. Rather than repeat this information in the current annual report, I refer the reader to the 2019-2020 and 2020-2021 annual reports, which can be found on the [WVU Faculty Ombudsperson Office website](#). The 2019-2020 report includes 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 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 (e.g., writing the Charter, securing confidential status for the Office, developing the website), engaging in extensive professional development, and otherwise preparing to begin meeting with visitors.<sup>1</sup> I began welcoming visitors October 1, 2019. During the 2020-2021 and 2021-2022 academic years, my top priority was providing ombuds 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.

The 2021-2022 academic year is my final year as Faculty Ombudsperson. I will be taking an unpaid leave of absence from WVU to allow me the flexibility to pursue outside research opportunities. The decision to apply for leave was difficult for me, especially because it means stepping away from the ombuds role. It is a privilege to have served in this role for the last three years, and I will miss it and those I've had the honor to work with.

I appreciate the assistance and support I've received from multiple offices and individuals inside WVU and externally. I hope those I have met and readers of this and the previous annual reports see the value the Faculty Ombudsperson Office adds to WVU.

Respectfully Submitted,

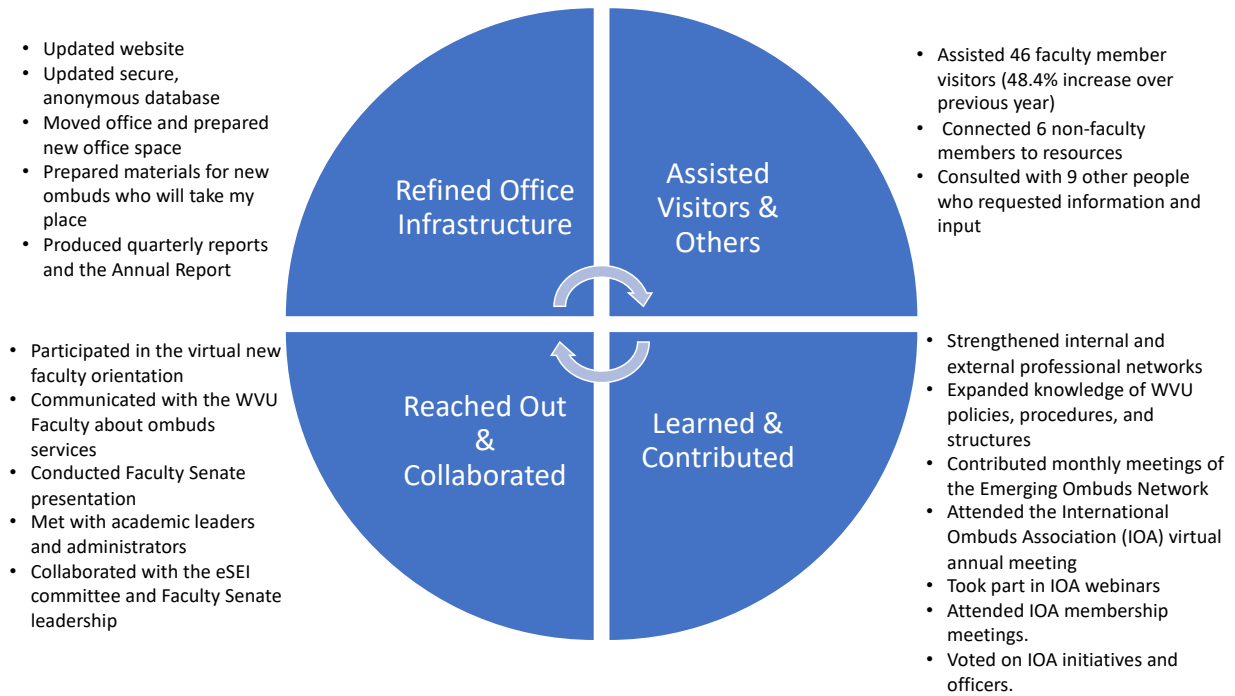
Jodi S. Goodman, Ph.D.  
Faculty Ombudsperson  
West Virginia University

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<sup>1</sup> 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 2021-2022 academic year. Detailed information appears in the body of the Annual Report.



## **Activities and Accomplishments for the 2021-2022 Academic Year**

During the 2021-2022 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 a number of activities that supported my efforts to assist visitors.

### **Refining the Ombudsperson Office Infrastructure**

The following are some of my undertakings in this area:

- Updated the WVU Faculty Ombudsperson Office website
- Refined the secure database for gathering de-identified data for purposes of the annual report
- Moved the ombuds office to the second floor of Morgan House and prepared the new office space
- Designed a template and produced quarterly reports for the Office of the Provost, while maintaining confidentiality and the anonymity of visitors
- Prepared materials to leave for a new ombudsperson who will take my place
- Continued to work to keep my ombuds and faculty positions separate

### **Professional Development and Contributions**

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 ombuds 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 and share knowledge of the ombuds profession and practice through self-study, active engagement in virtual meetings and discussion boards hosted by the IOA and Emerging Ombuds Network, and conversations with individual ombudspeople in my network
- Voted on IOA initiatives and in board elections
- Expanded my knowledge of WVU policies, procedures, and structures through searching and reading and conversations with academic leaders, administrators, and visitors

### **WVU Collaborations**

I served on the eSEI Panel as a non-voting member. I provided input into developing the procedures for faculty to submit reports of inappropriate student eSEI comments and for the reports to be evaluated by the voting members of the committee. I communicated with panel members as needed throughout the year.

I met with Faculty Senate leadership, including the chair of the Faculty Welfare Committee, to begin discussing how the Senate and Faculty Ombudsperson Office might collaborate on issues of concern to the WVU Faculty.

I held quarterly meetings with a subset of Provost Office members to provide information and recommendations regarding issues of concern to faculty members. I did so while maintaining confidentiality and protecting the identity of visitors, except in rare cases where visitors explicitly asked me to disclose their identities and specific information.

### **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, emailed the WVU Faculty regarding the availability of ombuds services; conducted a brief presentation during a monthly meeting of the WVU Faculty Senate; and met with members of the Faculty Senate Welfare Committee, Faculty Senate leadership, the director of Employee Relations, and others.

### **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

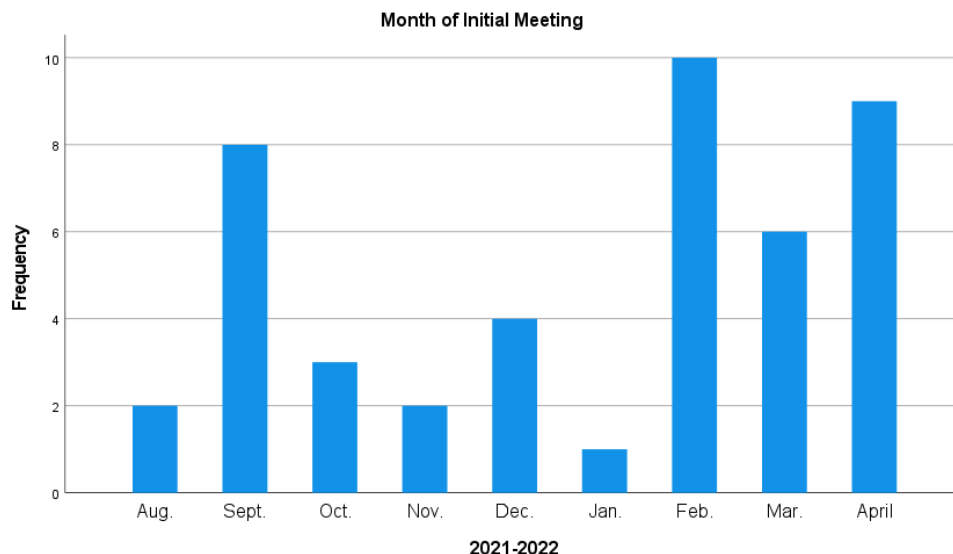
### Numbers of Visitors and Cases

Forty-six faculty visitors sought ombuds services from August 17, 2021 to May 4, 2022. This represents a 48.4 percent increase compared to the 2020-2021 academic year. Several visitors sought services a second time for ongoing or distinct concerns. It is standard practice to count repeat visitors as new visitors, because ombuds do not maintain identifying records. Most of the 46 visitors are different individuals.

A case may involve a single visitor or a group of visitors, with shared or initially conflicting concerns. One case included a pair of visitors with shared concerns, and the remainder were individual visitors.

An additional six non-faculty members contacted me in search of ombuds services. I gathered information about services available and referred these people with other parties for assistance. I also was called on by eight WVU employees with requests for information about the ombuds profession, conflict management training for faculty and staff, and ombuds services for additional groups in the campus community. I spent a total of approximately six hours assisting these 14 people. They represent a significant percentage of those who contacted me for assistance, which speaks to the interest in what ombuds do and the desire for ombuds services for other WVU community groups. Additionally, I provided information to a Marshall University staff member who is building an ombuds office, scheduled to open Fall 2022. The office will employ a full-time ombudsperson who will serve Marshall faculty and staff.

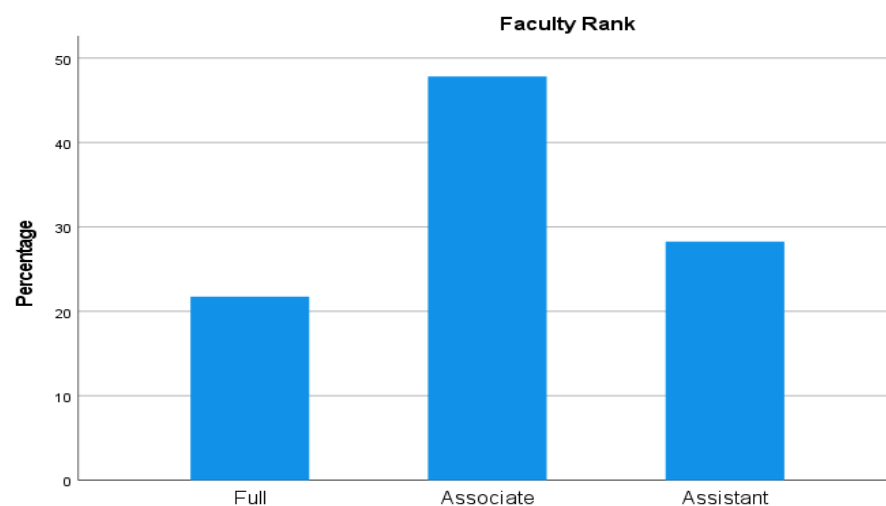
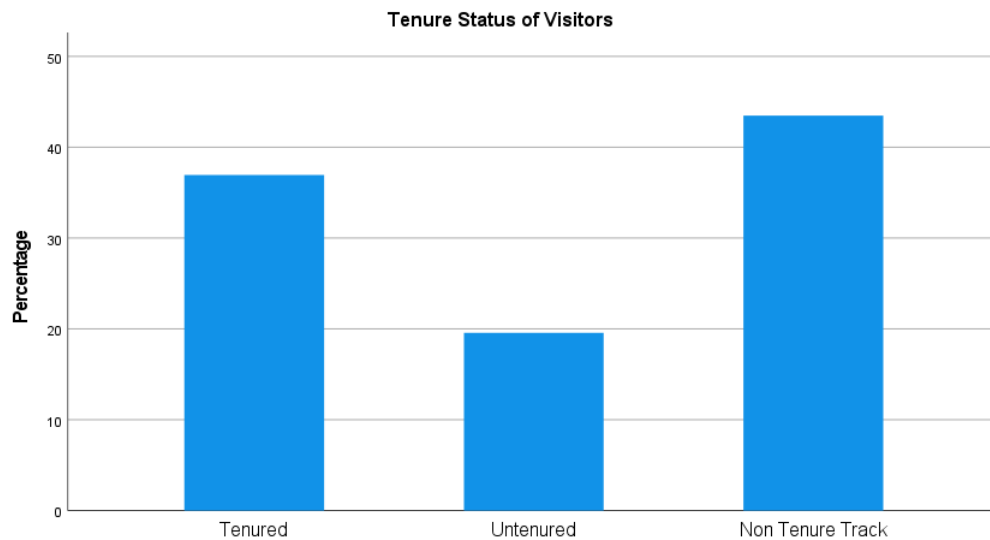
The information presented in the remainder of this report includes faculty visitors only. As shown in the figure below, the number of faculty visitors who contacted me for assistance varied by month. The graph covers the period from August 17, 2021 to May 4, 2022. Two visitors were excluded from the graph because we did not meet. At the time of this writing, seven visitor's cases remain open.



## Tenure Status and Faculty Rank

College, school, 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 units 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 previous two academic years 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 “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 15 visitors the day they contacted me and with 12 the next business day. Other initial meetings were delayed primarily by visitors’ schedules.

Most visitors preferred to meet virtually for convenience or because of the COVID-19 pandemic. Meeting location, 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 through additional virtual meetings and/or email 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	1.73 (1.92)	1	0	7
Number of face-to-face meetings	0.07 (.25)	0	0	1
Number of virtual video meetings	0.83 (1.34)	1	0	9
Number telephone meetings <sup>a</sup>	0.67 (1.12)	0	0	5
Email exchanges <sup>a</sup>	2.22 (5.36)	1	0	36
Time spent assisting (hours)	3.50 (3.91)	2.65	0.33	27.28
Length of engagement (days) <sup>b</sup>	17.25 (42.08)	6.5	1	269

<sup>a</sup> Excludes emails and phone calls for scheduling meetings and other brief contacts.

<sup>b</sup> May 12 was used as the closing date for the seven cases that remain open at the time of this writing.

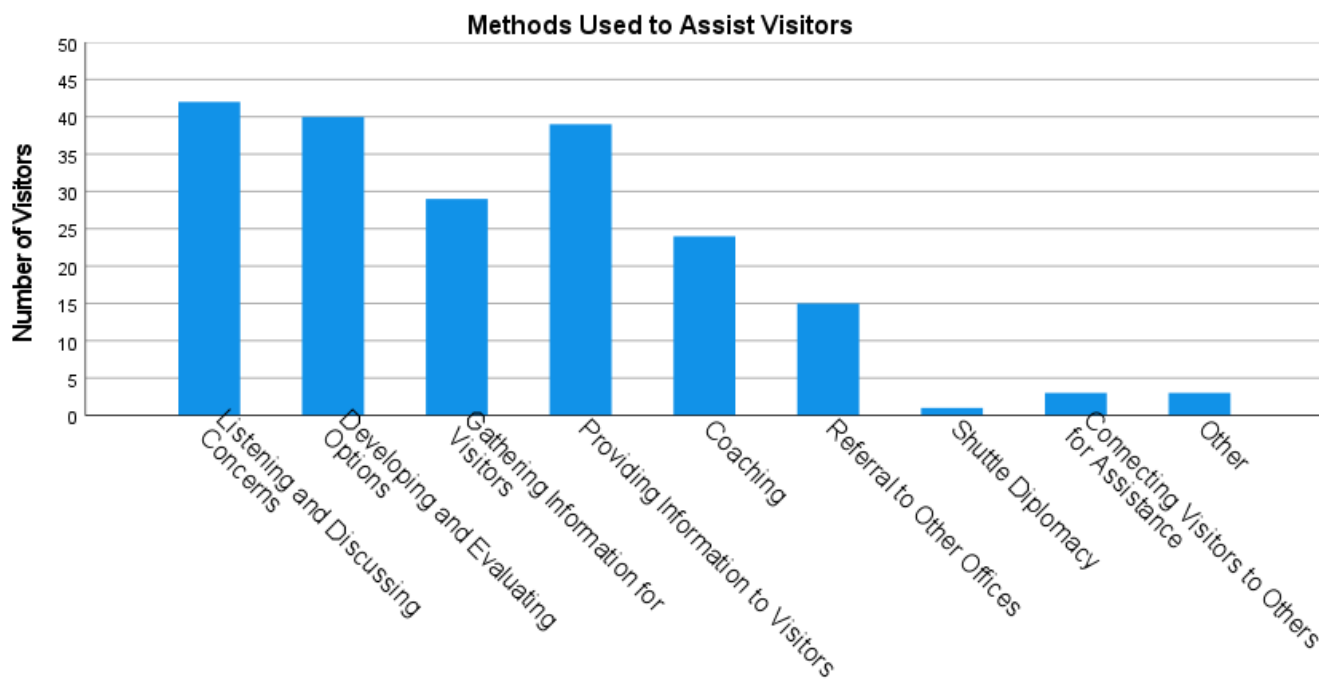
## Methods Used to Assist Visitors

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 to hear themselves speak out loud about their concerns, talk through their concerns and options, and obtain information about policies and practices from a confidential, objective party. 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, to facilitate connection with others able to provide assistance, or to inform campus leaders of specific concerns.

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.

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.



## Resolution of Concerns

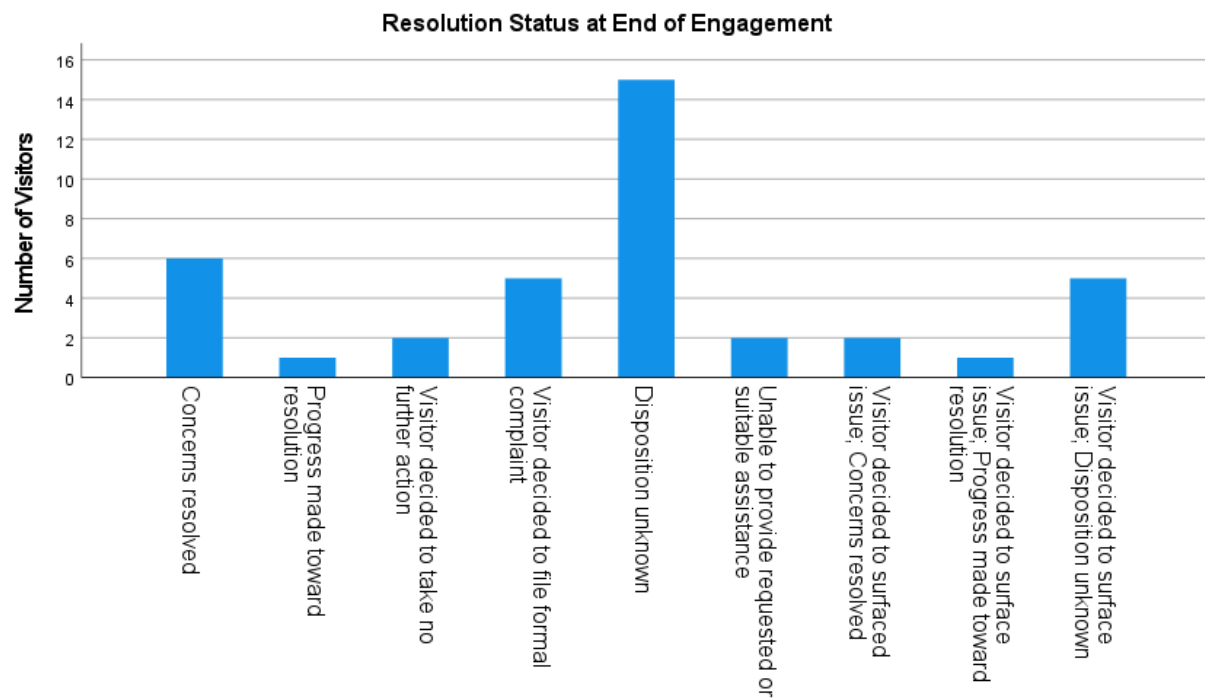
Consistent with the [Charter of the WVU Faculty Ombudsperson Office](#), I closed cases when they were resolved, visitors indicated they did not need further assistance, or after one-month of inactivity.

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. Ombuds services are entirely voluntary, and further contact should be the choice of the visitor.

For 10 of the 39 visitors for which cases were closed as of this writing, 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.

In eight cases, visitors decided to surface their concerns with college or University leaders for 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. Five visitors decided to file formal complaints. Most of these visitors tried to resolve the issues informally on their own, with my assistance, or in

conjunction with leaders before filing formal complaints. Seven visitors' cases remain open as of the writing of this report and are not included in the figure below.



## Workplace Concerns

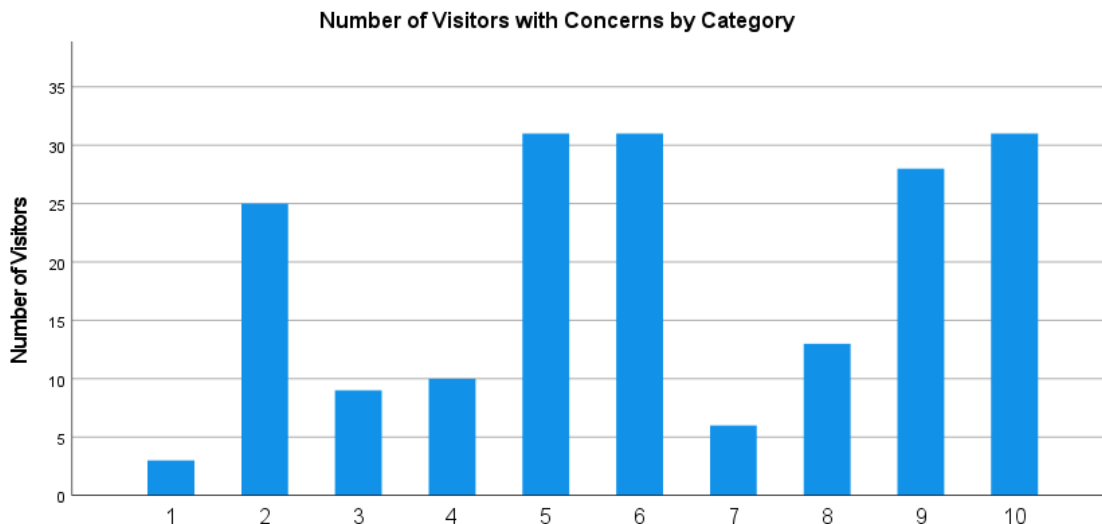
My intention is to provide information to promote positive change and continuous improvement. Conflict occurs in all organizations, and people seek assistance from ombudspersons for support in addressing conflicts and other concerns. While the data necessarily focus on problems, progress was made in resolving many of the concerns visitors brought to my office. Furthermore, some visitors were encouraged by the willingness of leaders and staff members 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 staff members and 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. Ombudspersons 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 concerns most frequently 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) <sup>a</sup>
1.	Compensation and benefits	Salary compression and inversion; gender pay inequity
2.	Upward evaluative relationships (department/division chair, assistant/associate chair, and unit managed)	Inequity of treatment, policy implementation; retaliation and/or fear of retaliation; power dynamics; managing complaints about visitors or others; disciplinary action; threats of disciplinary action; unable or unwilling to assist; effectiveness of supervisor; climate/norms in unit; beliefs, values, priorities
3.	Downward evaluative relationships (faculty, staff, undergraduate students, graduate students, post-docs, residents, interns supervised)	Beliefs, values, priorities; complaints about visitor or others; damage to reputation of visitor or others, damage to unit or program; trust, integrity
4.	Colleague (other faculty, staff) relationships	Bullying, mobbing, verbal abuse; complaints about visitor or others; equity of treatment; fear of retaliation; trust, integrity
5.	Career progression and development	Career progression (tenure, promotion, annual review); resigning or considering resigning from WVU or role; fear of termination, non-renewal; contract or position security; involuntary changes in work assignments or role; seeking modification of work or accommodation
6.	Legal, regulatory, and financial compliance	Lack of or insufficient due process; harassment; discrimination; insufficient accommodations; various violation reported
7.	Safety, health, and physical environment	Physical safety and security; flexible work arrangements
8.	Administrative services (University-level)	Administrative services decisions; policy implementation; policy clarity; unable or unwilling to help; behavior and/or responsiveness of administrative staff
9.	Organization and upper-level leadership (University, campus, college, centralized center)	Communication; bases for decision-making, policies, and practices; unable or unwilling to assist; unequal treatment; organizational culture and climate; priority setting and resource allocation; leadership capacity and quality; power dynamics
10.	Policies and procedures (University, campus college, centralized center)	Implementation of policy, procedure, standard; policies in need of revision; lack of clarity about what policy is; lack of policy, procedure, standard; seeking policy information or clarification

<sup>a</sup> 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. 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. Ombuds 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 career progression and development (Category 5); legal, regulatory, and financial compliance (Category 6), and higher-level policies and procedures (Category 10). These were followed by concerns related to organization and upper-level leadership (Category 9) and department/division supervisors (Category 2). Note that multiple parties were involved in many issues brought to my office.

The observations and recommendations I included in my previous annual reports 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](#) and page 15 of the [2020-2021 Annual Report for the WVU Faculty Ombudsperson Office](#).

Here, I'll briefly address two issues of concern to a significant number of visitors:

1. Twenty-six percent of visitors indicated they were considering or intended to resign from WVU or from particular positions because of conditions in their work environments. The reasons provided varied, with many involving experiences of problematic management practices, punitive actions, insufficient due process, and issues with the implementation of written policies. Conditions improved for some of these visitors as they worked to resolve their concerns. However, others were still planning to or contemplating leaving when we were last in contact.
2. Insufficient due process was of significant concern to several visitors. Visitors reported problems with WVU Employee Relations and State of West Virginia Grievance procedures, as well as formal evaluation practices, the management of their responses to concerns, and the handling of formal and informal complaints in colleges and divisions/departments. Visitors were troubled by what they experienced to be ambiguous policies, nontransparent procedures, punitive actions, lack of response, and inadequate information sharing regarding the bases for decisions.

Reviewing and revising policies to ensure they are clear and just, publicizing investigation and decision-making policies and procedures, verifying and ensuring policies are followed properly and even-handedly, and providing information regarding the bases for decisions can go a long way toward resolving and preventing the types of conflicts and concerns outlined in this report.

## **Future Directions and Conclusion**

There was a significant increase in the number of visitors seeking faculty ombuds services in the 2021-2022 academic year compared to 2020-2021. I believe it is important to expand the Office to allow for more outreach activities, with the goal of reaching and serving even greater numbers of faculty members. It also would be beneficial to keep the Office open over the summer months. This would allow the faculty ombudsperson 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 receive termination letters, and those otherwise in need of ombuds services during the summer months. Additionally, the interests of the University community would be served by having the faculty ombuds serve as a non-voting member on select cross-functional committees to provide insights as appropriate and to be in a better position to advocate for fair policies, procedures, and practices. While the ombuds does not represent faculty members or the University, advocating for fairness and systemic change is central to this role.

The WVU Faculty Ombudsperson Office is an independent, confidential, impartial, and informal conflict resolution resource for faculty members, including those in administrative roles. In this report, I summarized the concerns brought to me and presented what I observed and learned during this academic year. My past and current observations and 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.