

***Iowa State University
Ombuds Office
Annual Report
For FY 2015***

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Ombuds Office Annual Report for FY 2014-2015

Executive Summary

“The primary mission of the Iowa State University Ombuds Office is to provide confidential and impartial assistance that enables individuals to manage their own conflicts early, informally, and at the lowest levels possible without the need to pursue more formal grievance processes or litigation. . . . The Ombuds is neither an advocate for its visitors nor does it represent University management. Rather, the Ombuds is an advocate for respectful dialogue, fair practices, and mutual understanding.”

Iowa State University Ombuds Office Charter

- ✓ During FY 2015 153 people contacted the Ombuds Office for assistance – a 26% increase from FY 2014.
- ✓ Approximately 50% of the FY 2015 visitors were P&S employees, 21% were faculty, and almost 16% were graduate/professional students or post doctoral scholars.
- ✓ Female employees who visited the ombuds office continued to outnumber male employees by almost three to one. Female graduate/professional students outnumbered male students by over two to one.
- ✓ 17% of the FY 2015 visitors were in a protected class, which is slightly less than FY 2014.
- ✓ The number of visitors who expressed concerns that related to diversity increased slightly: from 17% to 20%.
- ✓ The main visitor issue continues to be some sort of interpersonal conflict, but many cases also expressed concerns regarding “lack of respect” or “failure to manage.”
- ✓ During FY 2015 the Ombuds Office increased its service to four days a week.
- ✓ Results from the Ombuds Office satisfaction survey continue to show that visitors are very satisfied with the services they receive.
- ✓ Survey results also indicate that visitors’ use of the Ombuds Office continues to prevent turnover, grievances and litigation.

History of the ISU Ombuds Office

A proposal to establish a faculty ombuds office was approved by the Iowa State University Faculty Senate in early 2002. Several months later the Professional and Scientific Council passed a motion asking University administrators to include Professional and Scientific staff in discussions regarding development of an ombuds office. According to reports published in *Inside Iowa State* at that time, the first discussions about the possibility of an ombuds office at the university actually began as far back in the early 1990s.

In December, 2005, an article in *Inside Iowa State* announced that “ISU faculty, staff and graduate students will soon have a new place to turn for help with problems or disputes – the Ombuds Office.” The following August (2006) the office finally opened as a two-year pilot project, and it was staffed by two part-time ombuds who shared a single .5 F.T.E. position. At the conclusion of the pilot project, the office began operating on a permanent basis in July, 2008. A single part-time ombuds officer was hired to provide ombuds service three days a week to faculty, Professional and Scientific staff, Confidential and Supervisory staff, and graduate and professional students. Soon thereafter service expanded to include post doctoral scholars. Beginning July 1, 2014, the ombuds office expanded its service once again, and it is now open four days a week to accommodate increasing visitor demand.

Ombuds Office Charter Describes its Role and Authority

On February 27, 2013 the Charter for the Iowa State University Ombuds Office, was signed by both President Steven Leath and Ombuds Officer Elaine Newell. The Charter officially established the office as an independent unit within the President’s office and defined the authority and responsibilities of the office as a confidential, neutral resource that can help students and employees with conflict management.

As noted in the Charter:

The primary mission of the Iowa State University Ombuds Office is to provide confidential and impartial assistance that enables individuals to manage their own conflicts early, informally, and at the lowest levels possible without the need to pursue more formal grievance processes or litigation. In addition, the Ombuds Office may alert University officials about systemic problems or general trends that merit further review or consideration for the good of the University community. The Ombuds is neither an advocate for its visitors nor does it represent University management. Rather, the Ombuds is an advocate for respectful dialogue, fair practices, and mutual understanding.

The Charter confirms that “[t]he University fully supports the confidentiality of the Ombuds Office. It encourages parties to come forward, confidentially share their concerns, and attempt early and collaborative resolution instead of resorting to prolonged appeals or litigation.” (Charter, p. 3) It also recognizes that “[w]hile the Ombuds Office can provide visitors with

information and assistance in conflict management, visitors are solely responsible for deciding what action they wish to take and for managing their own conflicts.” (Charter, p. 5)

Record High Number of Ombuds Visitors During FY 2015

This is the first year that the Ombuds Office was open four days a week, and it appears that the decision to extend the hours of service was appropriate and timely. This year the office experienced a dramatic 26% increase in the number of people who visited the office compared to FY 2014. As noted in previous annual reports, when averaged across the years, the number of visitors to the Ombuds Office has shown a steady growth over time.

Who Visited the Ombuds Office in FY 2015?

The following table indicates the number of visitors who sought assistance from the Ombuds Office each month during FY 2015, the service group to which they belonged, and their gender.

Month	Total	Faculty	P&S	C&S	Grad./Prof.	Post Doc	Other*
July	28	2 (2F)	23 (17F, 6M)	0	3 (3F)	0	0
August	8	3 (2F, 1M)	0	0	3 (3F)	1 (1F)	1 (1M)
September	18	7 (4F, 3M)	7 (6F, 1M)	0	2 (1F, 1M)	0	2 (1F, 1M)
October	16	3 (2F, 1M)	9 (6F, 3M)	0	1 (1M)	0	3 (2F, 1M)
November	10	2 (1F, 1M)	5 (3F, 2M)	0	1 (1F)	1 (1M)	1 (1F)
December	9	2 (2F)	3 (3F)	0	4 (2F, 2M)	0	0
SUBTOTAL	89	19	47	0	14	2	7
January	7	2 (2F)	1 (1M)	0	1 (1F)	1 (1F)	2 (1F, 1M)
February	9	2 (2F)	2 (2F)	0	3 (2F, 1M)	0	2 (2F)
March	11	1 (1M)	5 (4F, 1M)	0	4 (2F, 2M)	0	1 (1M)
April	13	4 (4F)	5 (4F, 1M)	0	1 (1F)	0	3 (3F)
May	14	4 (4F)	8 (7F, 1M)	0	1 (1F)	0	1 (1F)
June	10	1 (1F)	8 (8F)	0	0	0	1 (1M)
TOTALS	153	33 (26F, 7M)	76 (60F, 16M)	0	24 (17F, 7M)	3 (2F, 1M)	17 (11F, 6M)
Final %	100%	21.5%	49.7%	0	15.7%	.2%	1%

KEY:

- “TOTAL” -- the total number of new visitors for the month, midyear, or entire year
- “F” or “M” -- female or male
- “2(1F, 1M)” means there were 2 visitors that month: 1 female and 1 male
- “P&S” -- Professional and Scientific employees
- “C&S” -- Confidential or Supervisory employees
- “Grad./Prof.” -- Graduate or Professional students
- “Post Doc” -- Post doctoral scholars
- “*Other” -- visitors who don’t use the Ombuds office (undergraduates, covered merit, etc.)

During FY 2015 there was a 52% increase in the number of Professional and Scientific visitors, and Graduate/Professional Student visitors increased by 26%. Women continue to be the most frequent visitors to the Ombuds Office, and that has never been more apparent than FY 2015: over 75% of all visitors to the office were women.

The following multi-year summary of Ombuds Office visitor data illustrates how the number of annual visitors continued its steady upward trend.

Six-Year Comparison of Visitors to the Ombuds Office

	Total Visitors	Total Faculty Visitors	Total P&S Visitors	Total Grad./Prof. student visitors
FY 2015	153	33 <i>(26F, 7M)</i> 21.5% of all visitors	76 <i>(60F, 16M)</i> 49.7% of all visitors	24 <i>(17F, 7M)</i> 15.7% of all visitors
FY 2014	121	33 <i>(19F, 14M)</i> 27% of all visitors	50 <i>(36F, 14M)</i> 41% of all visitors	19 <i>(10F, 9M)</i> 16% of all visitors
FY 2013	91	28 <i>(14F, 14M)</i> 30.7% of all visitors	30 <i>(21F, 9M)</i> 32.9% of all visitors	18 <i>(12F, 6M)</i> 19.7% of all visitors
FY 2012	104	33 <i>(19F, 14M)</i> 31.9% of all visitors	44 <i>(35F, 9M)</i> 42.7% of all visitors	14 <i>(7F, 7M)</i> 13% of all visitors
FY 2011	79	23 <i>(14F, 9M)</i> 29% of all visitors	38 <i>(24F, 14M)</i> 48% of all visitors	3 <i>(2F, 1M)</i> 3.7% of all visitors
FY 2010	103	22 <i>(13F, 9M)</i> 21.3% of all visitors	61 <i>(45F, 16M)</i> 59.2% of all visitors	6 <i>(3F, 3M)</i> 5.8% of all visitors

New Tracking System Provides More Specific Data

Ever since the Ombuds Office first began using codes to anonymously track the types of conflict about which visitors had concerns, it has consistently reported that interpersonal conflict is the most common issue that visitors brought to the office – whether it was with a supervisor, a colleague, a subordinate, or a major professor. Yet over time it became apparent that data was not very helpful for identifying areas that could be corrected; it was just too vague.

In an effort to uncover data that might be more specific and useful for identifying situations that can actually be addressed, during FY 2015 the Ombuds Office added and tracked six new types of concerns that visitors described during their visits:

- LOC: Lack of communication
- LOR: Lack of respect (individuals perceive they are not being treated with respect by their colleagues/faculty)
- FTM: Failure to manage (a subordinate feels their supervisor is ignoring a problem)
- FTP: Failure to produce (an employee or student has failed to produce expected outcomes)
- GOS: Gossip (a workplace is unpleasant due to gossip about the visitor and/or others)
- EMC: Conflict has either arisen or escalated as a result of email exchanges

These issues were chosen for inclusion because every year they would regularly come up during conversations with Ombuds Office visitors. These new codes enabled the Ombuds Office to anonymously collect data that drilled down on the frequency of various sources of interpersonal conflict.

“Lack of Respect” is Key Concern of Most Visitors During FY 2015

The following shows the top issues mentioned by visitors during FY 2015, as well as how many visitors raised that concern:

FACULTY:

- 1. **Lack of respect (10) [30%]** ←
- Conflict with supervisor (10)** ←
- Issue related to diversity (10)** ←
- Tied
- 2. Conflict with colleague (8) [24%]
- 3. Conflict with subordinate (7) [21%]
- 4. Failure to manage (4) [12%]
- Lack of communication (4) [12%]

PROFESSIONAL AND SCIENTIFIC STAFF:

- 1. **Lack of respect (42) [55%]**
- 2. Conflict with supervisor (28) [37%]
- 3. Conflict with colleague (20) [26%]
- 4. Failure to manage (18) [24%]
- Lack of communication (14) [18%]

GRADUATE AND PROFESSIONAL STUDENTS:

- 1. **Conflict with major professor (10) [42%]**
- 2. Lack of respect (8) [33%]
- 3. Concern/question related to policies (7) [29%]
- 4. Concern about employment duties (5) [21%]
- 5. Issue related to diversity (5) [21%]

Diversity and the Ombuds Office

While the number of visitors to the Ombuds Office substantially increased during FY 2015, there was also a slight decrease in the number of visitors who either self-reported or appeared to be a member of a protected class: from 21% to 17%. Women continued to outnumber men, this year by approximately three to one. (This is described in more detail below.) The number of visitors who discussed at least one concern related to a diversity issue increased again during FY 2015; from 17% to 20%.

	Total # Visitors	Females	Males	Protected Class*	Diversity Related
FY 2015	153	75.8%	24%	17%	20%
FY 2014	121	66%	34%	21%	17%
FY 2013	91	61.5%	38%	25%	8.7%
FY 2012	104	64%	35.5%	20%	12.5%
FY 2011	79	59%	40.5%	21.5%	16%
FY 2010	103	65%	34.9%	15.5%	14.5%

(*Protected Class" includes race, color, national origin, religion, LGBT, and disability.)

To break down this information by service group, the number of visitors whose concern included an issue related to diversity is as follows:

Faculty: 9 visitors (out of a total of 33 faculty visitors)

Professional and Scientific: 16 visitors (out of a total of 76 P&S visitors)

Graduate and Professional Students: 5 visitors (out of a total of 24 P&S visitors)

One fact that may merit a closer look is that, of the visitors who self-reported or appeared to have protected class status, almost 35% of them also raised "Lack of Respect" as a concern (9 out of 26 visitors). Likewise, 56% of the visitors who shared a concern related to diversity also reported feeling a lack of respect (17 out of 30). *It is important to note that this data does not enable the Ombuds to definitively state that the lack of respect these visitors perceived is based on, or related to, protected class status or diversity.* No data was collected that makes that connection. However this is an area that deserves additional thought regarding data collection and analysis for the coming year. Some of the questions that should be considered:

- Does this data raise a 'red flag' that supports the need for additional tracking of data in FY 2016?
- What additional data should be tracked, and how should it be tracked?
- If additional data tracking is appropriate, can it be tracked while still maintaining visitor confidentiality?

High Numbers of Women Visitors; Similar Concerns

During FY 2015 the percentage of women visitors to the Ombuds Office continued to far exceed the percentage of women in the population at the university.

	<i>I.S.U. Headcount*</i>		<i># of Ombuds Visitors</i>	
	<i># of females</i>	<i># of males</i>	<i># of females</i>	<i># of males</i>
Faculty	744 (39%)	1148 (61%)	26 (79%)	7 (21%)
P&S	1554 (56%)	1241 (44%)	60 (79%)	16 (21%)
Grad/Profl	2600 (47%)	2941 (53%)	17 (71%)	7 (29%)

*FY 2014 data from The I.S.U. Fact Book

While this trend has been occurring for the past six years, this year the disproportionate number of women visitors is more striking than in the past: over 70% of the Ombuds Office visitors in every group were women. Over 75% of all visitors to the office were women. Also, another important component in this year’s data is that, out of the 61 ombuds visitors who mentioned “Lack of Respect” as an issue, 48 of those visitors were women – almost 80%.

Some of the concerns women perceived and discussed at the Ombuds Office in FY 2015:

- salary inequality
- limited opportunities for career development or advancement
- expected to spend excessive/unreasonable amount of time in the lab (grad students)
- lack of respect from faculty & administrators (P&S)
- few opportunities for professional development (P&S)
- disparities in how various managers ‘flex’ time for employees whose jobs require them to work at events outside of normal business hours
- lack of guidance for managers re: support for work/life balance problems,
- general lack of support for work/life balance

An interesting coincidence – or perhaps even a corollary -- to this data is that during FY 2015 the number of women who took classes offered by University Human Resources on developing personal leadership skills or on managing conflict far outnumbered the number of men who took those classes. In fact, the women outnumbered men by at least two to one, and in some cases three to one.

People who come to the Ombuds Office want to discuss issues that are important to them. Unfortunately, this data could raise an inference that many of the women who came to the Ombuds Office during FY 2015 perceived a lack of respect, and felt like the University wasn’t

supporting their effort to have a reasonable work/life balance. Of course, the Ombuds Office usually hears only the visitor's side of the story, and has no way of knowing if every allegation is true – or if none of them are true. Perhaps existing organizations on campus – for example, University Human Resources, the P&S Council, the Faculty Senate, or the University Committee on Women – could use this data as a starting point for additional investigation into possible problems and resolutions. It is entirely possible that further investigation into these issues could lead to improvements for not just women but everyone in the University community.

Additional Issues that May Merit Further Consideration

Many employees perceive their managers as not managing. A relatively high percentage of both faculty (12%) and P&S (24%) employees felt that their manager was not managing, i.e., was not dealing with a difficult person or situation. These individuals definitely resented that their manager was getting paid more to be a manager yet wasn't performing that job, which meant that some unpleasant aspect of their workplace wasn't improving. Unfortunately, when the Ombuds Officer was given permission to speak to some of these managers, often they admitted that they *weren't* doing anything to address the problem! The reason for not trying to solve the problem was usually some variation on the common theme of conflict avoidance: it would require a difficult conversation, they didn't want to rock the boat, they were afraid it would turn into an angry confrontation, they were worried the problem person would complain or file a grievance, etc. Often these situations go unnoticed because most individuals are reluctant to complain up the chain of command (to their supervisor's supervisor) about anything – let alone about their supervisor's failure to manage. It may be useful for appropriate administrators in University Human Resources or the Provost's office to look at possible ways to address this issue.

Student/Mentor Relationships Suffer if Expectations are Out of Sync. Every year the most common concern that graduate student visitors bring to the Ombuds Office is that they are in conflict with their major professor. Most of these conflicts arise when the student has one set of expectations for their mentor/mentee relationship, and the faculty member has another – yet the two of them rarely discuss their respective expectations with each other. They discuss the work or the research being done, but nothing else. Meanwhile, the student usually wants their major professor to give them guidance related to finding a job, meeting colleagues in the field, how data will be shared or published, etc., while the major professor is often focused on work related to the research project. It seems that a possible solution to this problem would be to provide more training and encouragement to graduate students *and* graduate faculty on how to establish and communicate with each other about their expectations for their mentor/mentee relationship, rather than simply talking about the project on which they are working.

P&S staff want more specifics on HR processes. Frequently P&S staff who visit the Ombuds Office ask “What are my *rights* . . .?” Often (but not always) this question arises in situations involving human resource situations. During FY 2015 this question came up in the context of:

- What exactly goes into my personnel file, and who has access to it?
- Who gets called for references if I apply for another job on campus?
- How does the Performance Improvement Process work?
- What happens during and after an investigation by the Office of Equal Opportunity?

Adding specific information about procedures like these to the websites of various offices could go a long way towards reassuring the University community that such procedures are fairly administered.

Outreach & Education Raises Awareness about the Ombuds Office

The large number of visitors to the Ombuds Office during this past year prevented the Ombuds Officer from continuing her previous practice of sending personal welcoming emails to new university employees. (Hopefully that process can resume during FY 2016.) Nonetheless, the Ombuds either participated in or presented at seventeen different events for audiences that included:

- Emerging Leaders Academies (for both the employee and the graduate student groups)
- P&S Council meeting and a P&S Council seminar
- four training sessions presented by University Human Resources
- Lunch and learn seminar for post docs
- Meetings of several graduate student organizations
- Several departmental meetings for faculty, or staff

The Ombuds also provided outreach or assistance to several external organizations:

- South Dakota State University
- Oklahoma State University
- Grinnell University
- a community business group in Ft. Dodge.

Professional Development During FY 2015

This year the Ombuds Officer was fortunate to have become a member of the National Association of College and University Attorneys, thanks to the ISU Office of University Counsel. This provided access to NACUA weekly legal updates on higher education legal items of note, plus access to its excellent list serve information. She also participated in two webinars (on coaching, and how to encourage people to change unproductive behaviors), plus a presentation offered by staff from the university’s Department of Public Safety: “Nonverbal Cues and Unstable Devices.”

Survey Results Continue to Show Visitors' Satisfaction

The Ombuds Office tracks visitor satisfaction by surveying its visitors. For a visitor to receive a survey, 1) the visitor must have met with the ombuds and discussed a concern; 2) the visitor's case must be closed, and 3) the ombuds must have a current address for that visitor. During FY 2015, eighty-nine visitors were sent a survey inviting their feedback about their experience with the Ombuds Office. Thirty-six of these visitors returned a completed survey (return rate: 40%). Results from the Ombuds Office satisfaction surveys, reflected in the following table, indicate that visitors continue to be happy with the services they received. It is especially satisfying to see that responses to questions 8 and 9 appear to indicate visitors are so satisfied that they are willing to refer others to the ombuds office.

	Avg. Response
1. The physical location of the Ombuds Office (in Physics Hall) is suitably discrete.	4.6
2. The Ombuds Officer understood my situation.	4.5
3. The Ombuds Officer suggested options or helped me develop strategies that applied to my situation.	4.3
4. The Ombuds Officer told me about relevant University policies, procedures, and services.	4.3
5. The Ombuds Office felt like a safe environment for me to discuss my concern.	4.7
6. The Ombuds Officer was neutral.	4.7
7. The Ombuds Office will protect the confidentiality of my information.	4.7
8. Regardless of the outcome of my situation, my overall experience with the Ombuds Office has been positive.	4.7
9. I would refer others to the Ombuds Office.	4.7

KEY

- 1: Strongly disagree
- 2: Disagree
- 3: Neutral
- 4: Agree
- 5: Strongly agree

A Sample of Visitors' Survey Comments

"Very positive and productive experience. Thank you for the resources and information."

"I really appreciate the time spent with Ms. Newell. She listened carefully to my situation, offered very helpful suggestions, and had useful and practical interpretations of others' viewpoints. There was never any shortage of highly pragmatic and down-to-earth feedback. I

hope there will not be a need to make use of the Ombuds Office in the future, but if so, there will be no hesitation on my part.”

“This was a great benefit to have in an attempt to solve conflict. Helped me clarify my thoughts and not react emotionally.”

“My visit was very helpful and led me to a comfortable resolution.”

The Ombuds Office Continues to Prevent Turnover, Grievances and Litigation

Another value of the Ombuds Office Survey process is that it reveals what individuals would have done if they had *not* contacted the Ombuds Office. This is particularly important because it can identify potential financial benefits that accrue when individuals choose to forgo resignation, grievances or litigation as a result of visiting the Ombuds Office. During FY 2015 Ombuds Office visitors indicated the following on their survey responses:

“If you had not used the Ombuds Office, what would you have done instead?”

- *Nothing: 4*
- *Remained in my situation, but been personally/professionally distracted by it: 21*
- *Looked for another position or quit: 16*
- *Filed a appeal/grievance/formal complaint: 4*
- *Consulted with an attorney or taken legal action: 4*

Moving Forward into FY 2016

Time and time again, ISU employees who were visiting the Ombuds Office would say something to the effect of: “Don’t get me wrong – I love working with the students.” So despite whatever frustrations they felt, their commitment to providing an excellent experience to students was almost without exception. Likewise, graduate students would express how much they loved the research they were working on, and their desire to continue working on it.

The information in this report -- that increasing numbers of people are coming to the Ombuds Office to discuss their concerns -- should not be seen as evidence that the University is a bad place. To the contrary, it should be seen as evidence that the members of the University community see the value in examining and discussing ways to improve what goes on in their workplace, their lab, or their classroom. According to Bill Gates, “We all need people who will give us feedback. That’s how we improve.” Faculty, staff, and students continue to take advantage of the Ombuds Office as a safe place to discuss perceived problems, develop possible solutions, and try to improve the University they care about very much. This willingness to challenge how things are done now, in an effort to improve things moving forward, is a valuable hallmark of Iowa State University and the entire University community.