



# Iowa State University

Ombuds Office | Annual Report

FY2021 (*July 1, 2020 to June 30, 2021*)

*As reported by MWI*

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## ***Message from The Ombuds Team at MWI***

Please find the FY2021 Ombuds Office Annual report for your review. This report provides a summary of visitors between July 1, 2020 and June 30, 2021, including the concerns they raised, the action taken by the Ombuds Team, and recommendations based the year's activities and findings.

Following years of previous ombuds reports, MWI collected data on visitors, their demographics, their role at ISU, and their specific concerns. MWI reported this information consistently with previous years so it can be easily compared over time.

In response to ombuds best practices, MWI approached certain data and reporting practices differently than previous ombuds. First, MWI tracked the number of visitors differently (see Visitor Trends on page 6 for a description). Second, visitors were given the option to self-report their gender and race after their matter with the ombuds office was closed (see Visitor Trends on page 6 for more information). Finally, MWI classified visitor concerns using the International Ombuds Association's Uniform Reporting categories, which is considered standard and best practice within the field. You can learn more about these categories and other ombuds best practices in Appendix A.

If you have any questions about this report, please contact Dawn Bratsch-Prince, Associate Provost for Faculty at [deprince@iastate.edu](mailto:deprince@iastate.edu). Thank you for the opportunity to serve your students, faculty, and staff with ombuds service in FY 2021.

Chuck Doran & the ISU Ombuds Team

## Brief History

The Ombuds Office opened on August 15, 2006 as a pilot program which offered impartial and confidential help to faculty, staff and graduate and professional students who had work-related problems. The pilot Ombuds Office proved to be successful and was made permanent in 2008 with a year-round appointment of a three-fifths time (24 hours per week) Ombuds Officer. In 2014, the appointment changed to a four-fifths time (32 hours a week) year-round appointment. In 2017, the Ombuds Officer position evolved into a full-time year-round appointment. From 2020 through 2021, MWI served as an interim outside ombuds service provider, with a new full-time year-round appointment made for 2022.

ISU should be commended for supporting the establishment and continuation of an ombuds office at the University since 2006. This shows ISU's commitment to surfacing and resolving topics that would otherwise not be available to the University.

## Ombuds Standards of Practice and Code of Ethics

The Ombuds Officer follows the standards of practice and code of ethics established by the International Ombuds Association and as outlined in the Iowa State University Charter. The core principles of the ombuds are:

- **Confidentiality:** All contacts, conversations and information exchanged with the Ombuds remain confidential and are not disclosed by the Ombuds without the consent of all parties involved. Exceptions to confidentiality exist when disclosure is necessary to protect someone from imminent harm and when otherwise required by law.
- **Neutrality & Impartiality:** An Ombuds is an impartial person on behalf of all members of the University community. As such, the Ombuds remains impartial and unaligned. An Ombuds does not take sides, serve as an agent, represent or advocate on behalf of any party or the University. Rather, it is the role of the Ombuds to consider the interests and safety of all parties involved in a search for a fair resolution to a problem. An Ombuds promotes and advocates fairness and a resolution of systemic problems within the University.
- **Informality:** Consultations are conducted 'off the record' and do not constitute notice to the University in any way. Organizational Ombuds are not mandated reporters and will not become involved in, or part of, formal institutional processes (such as mandatory reporting, formal complaints, investigations, appeals, etc.). No personal information is retained or used for subsequent formal proceedings. An Ombuds will not serve as a witness nor offer testimony in any formal proceeding, unless required by law. Individuals using the services of the Ombuds Office retain their rights to all formal procedures ordinarily available to them and are solely responsible for determining their course of action.

- **Independence:** To ensure objectivity, the office operates independently of all University entities and reports to the highest possible level of the institution. An Ombuds exercises sole discretion over whether or how to act regarding an individual's concern, a trend or concerns of multiple individuals over time (IOA Standards of Practice).

The Ombuds Officer listens to concerns, helps clarify the relevant issues, develops communication strategies, provides resources, policies, referrals, and options, as well as facilitates difficult or uncomfortable conversations with another individual. The Ombuds Officer is not a personal advocate and cannot provide legal advice, waive university policies, conduct formal investigations, or issue formal decisions.

## Executive Summary

- The Ombuds Office assisted 164 visitors in FY2021.
  - 56 Faculty members
  - 50 Professional & Scientific staff
  - 34 Graduate and Professional students
  - 10 Merit staff
  - 1 Post-doctoral student
  - 3 Other visitors
- The top concern, brought up by almost half of all visitors, regarded problems in an evaluative relationship. This represents a six-year trend in the Ombuds Office and has been a top concern since the inception of the Ombuds Office.
- Concerns with communication also emerged as a top theme among visitors in FY2021. Communication issues were raised in almost all types of working relationships and across a variety of topics. The ombuds recommends investing in building the communication skills and capacity of faculty, staff, and students
- The Ombuds Office supported visitors through informal coaching conversations, mediation among affected parties, facilitated meetings, and referrals to appropriate offices.

## Visitor Information

MWI’s methodology for tracking visitors differs from the previous ombuds. This method focuses on the visitor as a person, rather than separating their nuanced concerns into different “visitors.” To be counted as a visitor, the eligible employee must have contacted the ombuds and shared a concern. Mere inquiries, where an employee contacted the ombuds to speak but never shared a concern and never responded to any follow-up from the ombuds, were not counted as visitors. While this results in a noticeably lower number of reported visitors, it provides a more accurate understanding of the number of faculty, staff and graduate students who interacted with the ombuds office during the year.

There were 164 visitors to the Ombuds Office in FY2021. The Visitors Trends Chart provides a breakdown of this number by gender since 2009, and the Visitor Five Year Comparison provides a breakdown by role (Faculty, Professional & Scientific Staff, Graduate & Professional Students, Merit Staff, and Post-Doctoral).

### **Visitor Trends**

Following best practices, MWI allowed visitors to self-identify their gender and race in a follow-up survey after the completion of their interaction with the ombuds office. This system of data collection provides more accurate demographic information, based on visitors’ own reporting, and it allows the visitor to provide the information when they are most comfortable doing so. Compared to previous years, this system resulted in fewer visitors’ gender being reported.

	Total Visitors	Females	Males	Not Provided
FY 2021	164	70	56	37
FY 2020	561	359	200	2 (non-binary)
FY 2019	528	324	204	--
FY 2018	310	195	115	--
FY 2017	94	58	36	--
FY 2016	128	85	42	1 (anonymous)
FY 2015	153	116	37	--
FY 2014	121	80	41	--
FY 2013	91	56	35	--
FY 2012	104	67	37	--
FY 2011	79	47	32	--
FY 2010	103	67	36	--
FY 2009	80	41	39	--

MWI also used the same system to collect data on race, which the ISU ombuds office had not previously collected. Few visitors self-reported their race, with 122 visitors selecting not to respond. Due to the small sample size, the ombuds will not provide a report on the self-reported race of visitors. Please see the Recommendations section of this report for the ombuds recommendations to improve the collection of this and other demographic visitor data.

### Visitor Five Year Comparison

The following multi-year summary of Ombuds Office visitor data illustrates the total number of Faculty, P&S, Grad/Prof., Merit, and Post Doc. visitors to the office.

	Total Visitors	Total Faculty Visitors	Total P&S Visitors	Total Grad/Prof Visitors	Total Merit	Total S&C Visitors	Total Post Doc Visitors	Total Other Visitors
FY 2021	164	56 (18F, 25M, 13NR) 34%	60 (27F, 21M, 12NR) 37%	34 (21F, 7M, 6NR) 21%	10 (3F, 3M, 4NR) 6%	--	1 (1F) .6%	3 (1F, 2NR) 2%
FY 2020	561	171 (91F, 80M) 30%	251 (186F, 63M, 2NB) 45%	71 (30F, 41M) 13%	59 (48F, 11M) 10%	--	7 (2F, 5M) 1%	2 (2F) .4%
FY 2019	528	188 (90F, 98M) 36%	239 (187F, 52M) 45%	58 (26F, 32M) 11%	31 (21F, 10M) 6%	--	--	--
FY 2018	310	106 (56F, 50M) 34%	102 (73F, 29M) 33%	31 (15F, 16M) 10%	20 (18F, 2M) 6%	41 (24F, 17M) 13%	--	--
FY 2017	94	27 (20F, 7M) 29%	38 (26F, 12M) 41%	20 (9F, 11M) 21%	--	--	--	--

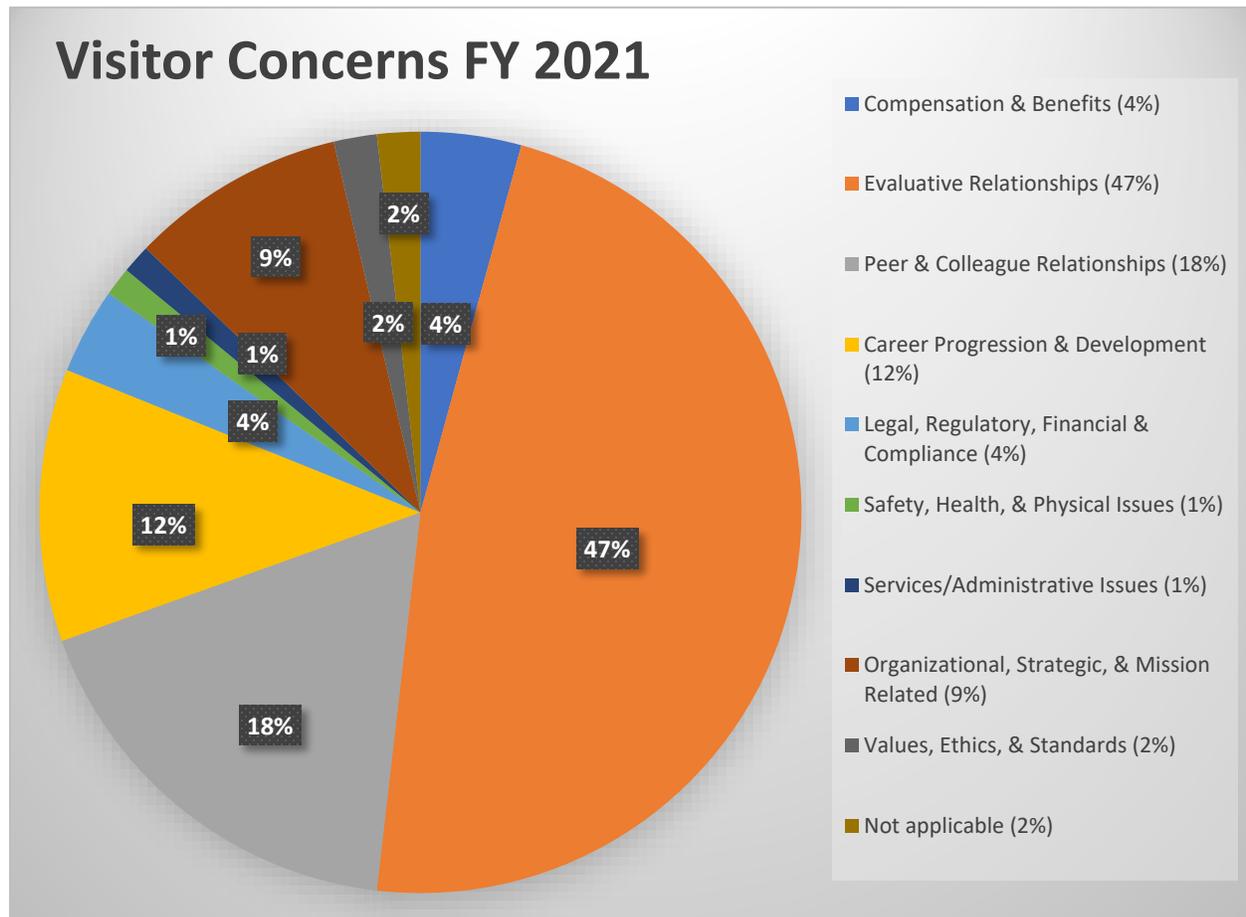
(F = Female / M = Male / NR = Not Reported / NB = Non-Binary)

### Visitors Compared to University Population

	ISU Headcount*			2021 Ombuds Visitors		
	% of females	% of males	% of not reported	% of females	% of males	% of not reported
Faculty	39.9%	59.8%	.3%	32.1%	44.7%	23.2%
P&S	57.7%	42.1%	.2%	45%	35%	20%
Merit	55.3%	44.6%	.1%	30%	30%	40%
Grad/ Prof	41.4%	55.7%	2.9%	63.6%	18.2%	18.2%
Post Doc	40.7%	58.6%	.7%	100%	--	--
Other	--	--	--	33.3%	--	66.7%

\*Based on data from the ISU Factbook

## Summary of Visitor Concerns



\*Based on the International Ombuds Association's Uniform Reporting Categories.

\*\*"Not applicable" includes ineligible visitors and unresponsive visitors who did not share a categorizable concern.

The top four categories of concerns raised by visitors were:

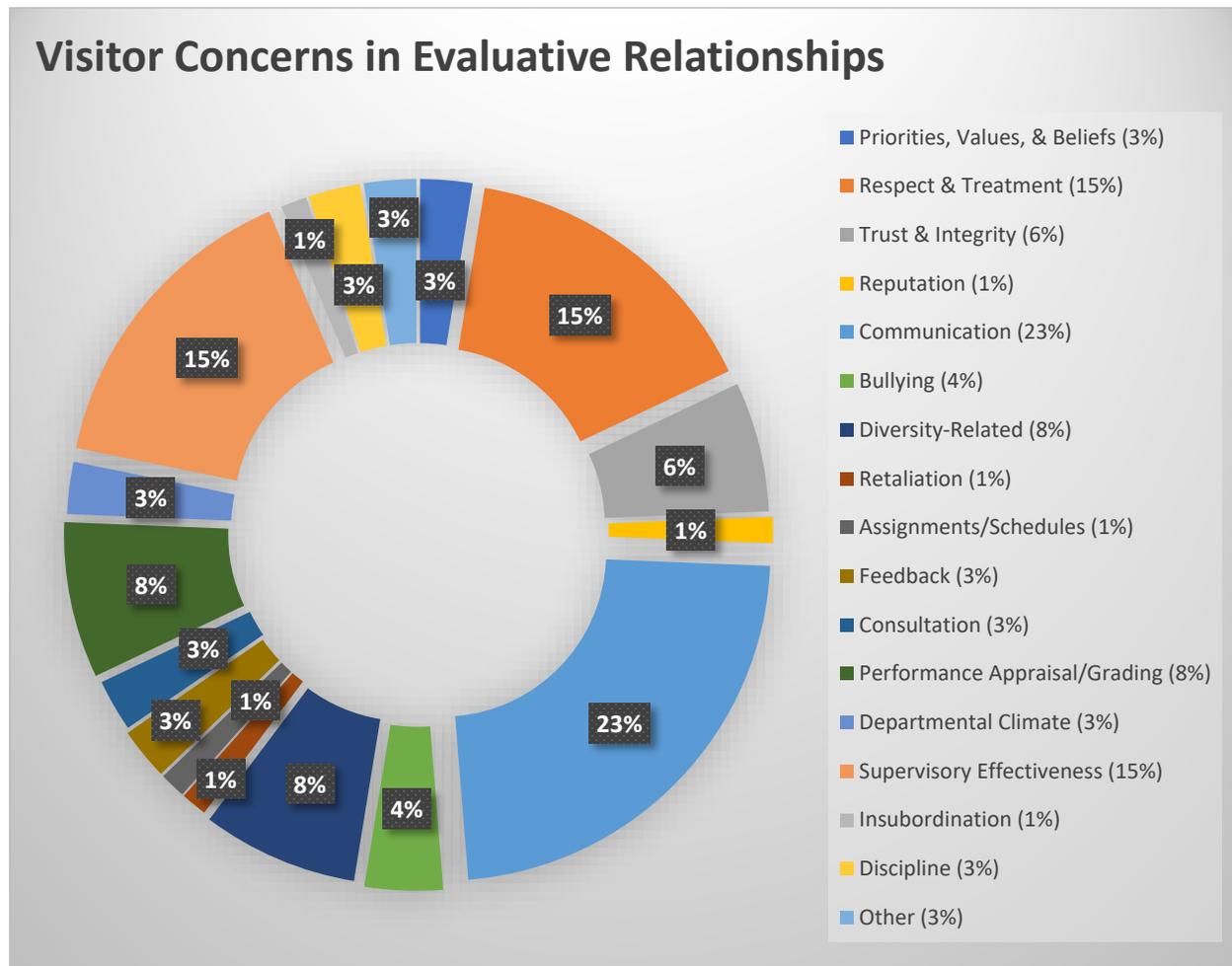
- *Evaluative Relationships* (e.g., between supervisor-employee, faculty-student, chair-faculty member): 47%
- *Peer & Colleague Relationships* (peers or colleagues who do not have a supervisory-employee or student-professor relationship): 18%
- *Career Progression & Development* (administrative processes and decisions regarding entering and leaving a job, what it entails, recruitment, nature and place of assignment, job security, and separation): 12%
- *Organizational, Strategic, & Mission-Related* (issues or inquiries that relate to the whole or some part of an organization): 9%

These concerns track a growing trend in the ISU Ombuds Office. Conflict with a supervisor or concerns with an evaluative relationship has been the top concern among visitors for six consecutive years; in fact, a previous ombuds report noted that conflict with a supervisor has been a common concern since

the ombuds office opened. Also, conflict with a peer or colleague has been the second-most cited concern for four consecutive years.

**Evaluative Relationships**

Almost half of all concerns reported by visitors related to their evaluative relationships. Within this category, visitors raised a substantial variety of issues:



The top concerns within evaluative relationships were communication (23%), respect & treatment (15%), supervisory effectiveness (15%), performance appraisal/grading (8%), and diversity-related (8%).

Each of these top concerns interrelate with one another in important ways. For instance, several visitors contacted an ombuds because they were struggling to communicate with their advisor or supervisor about the way they were treated or disrespected. A supervisor struggled to share a poor performance appraisal with a resistant employee, and several visitors shared their frustration with their departments' unwillingness to discuss issues regarding DEIB (diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging).

### Communication: 23%

- *Feeling unheard and unacknowledged:* A common concern among visitors in this category was feeling unheard. They raised a concern with their supervisor, and that concern was dismissed. Similarly, several visitors cited a lack of acknowledgement for their accomplishments and a feeling that there was only focus on criticisms and areas for improvement.
- *Unresponsiveness:* Some visitors' communication issues centered around a lack of access to their supervisor. Emails went unanswered, projects received little to no feedback, and supervisors showed up late to scheduled meetings or cancelled them regularly.
- *Discomfort raising concerns:* Several visitors were either seeking assistance to raise a concern with someone in a position of authority over them, or someone contacted the ombuds seeking such assistance for the visitor. They lacked the skills and confidence to raise a resolvable concern or uncomfortable issue, and instead they elevated the complaint to a department chair or sought to change advisors.
  - *Fear of retaliation:* A few other visitors wanted to raise their concerns, but they feared retaliation. One visitor reported that they did experience retaliation after raising an ethics concern about their supervisor.
- *Managing differences of opinion:* Faculty and other employees understandably have different ideas about how to approach their work, but several visitors struggled to talk about these differences when they occurred in an evaluative relationship. Each side would feel unheard and unvalued, and a couple visitors felt their ideas were unfairly attacked in a more personal way.

### Respect & Treatment: 15%

- *Managing faculty/advisor and graduate student relationships:* Several visitors struggled with the unique nature of these working relationships, which can straddle the line between professional supervisor-employee and personal friendship. Concerns included faculty seeking emotional support from students, people showing up unprepared for meetings, feedback and requests being delivered using an unprofessional method or unprofessional language, and advisory duties being ignored at the students' expense.
- *Unprofessional tone and behavior:* Several visitors raised concerns about chairs or managers whose tone is aggressive, hostile, or demeaning. This was particularly pronounced in meetings. Different ideas or suggestions for improvement were met with dismissal or derision. Visitors felt stifled, intimidated, and unproductive as a result of these behaviors, which sowed distrust for their supervisor and their department.
- *Distribution of resources and courses:* A few visitors felt disrespected and treated unfairly when they received a different course load, received less support to money for grants, or discovered a pay disparity.

### Supervisory Effectiveness: 15%

- *Difficulty managing disagreements within departments:* A few visitors felt their department chair struggled to manage disagreements. This came up in two ways: either the chair resisted differences of opinion from others, or the chair did not or was unable to address negative behaviors from other faculty (ex. yelling, name-calling, unproductive behaviors in meetings).
- *Failing to provide effective feedback or manage disagreements with direct report:* Visitors noted instances where they did not receive effective feedback from their supervisor, leaving them unable to improve their work. This was especially noted among graduate students, who rely on their advisor's feedback to complete their required research. Others felt that their supervisor was not open to upward feedback, choosing to either ignore or argue about suggestions/areas of disagreement.
- *Lack of clarity with advisor/PI:* Graduate students in this category cited the impact of a PI who failed to create clarity. These students felt this lack of clarity hindered their career progress and the success of their research.
- *Long hours and heavy workload:* A couple visitors explicitly raised a concern that was an underlying theme in – they must work long hours under pressure of a heavy workload to succeed in their work. Visitors who raised this concern did not necessarily request fewer hours or less work. Rather, they wanted predictability in their schedule/work, communication from their supervisor about the progress of their projects, and recognition for their hard work.

### Performance Appraisal/Grading: 8%

- *Seeking information or support:* Several visitors contacted the ombuds to learn more about the performance evaluation process and what to expect. Resources such as the faculty handbook were reviewed. Others sought support to manage concerns about their performance evaluation, including how to discuss the fact that they fell short on certain measures and how to ensure a fair evaluation from someone with whom they have a personal disagreement.
- *Ensuring a fair and balanced review:* A few visitors felt that their performance evaluation only focused on the negatives, failing to take into account their accomplishments and what they did well. A couple visitors noted they felt extraneous circumstances, such as illness, were not properly considered in their review.
- *Lack of feedback preceding performance evaluation:* Some visitors were frustrated because they were only made aware of negative feedback during their performance evaluation. They felt blindsided and confused by the process, wishing that they received critical feedback sooner so they could have improved their performance.
- *Impact of COVID-19:* Certain faculty visitors felt that the impact of COVID-19 on their teaching was not properly considered.

### Diversity-Related: 8%

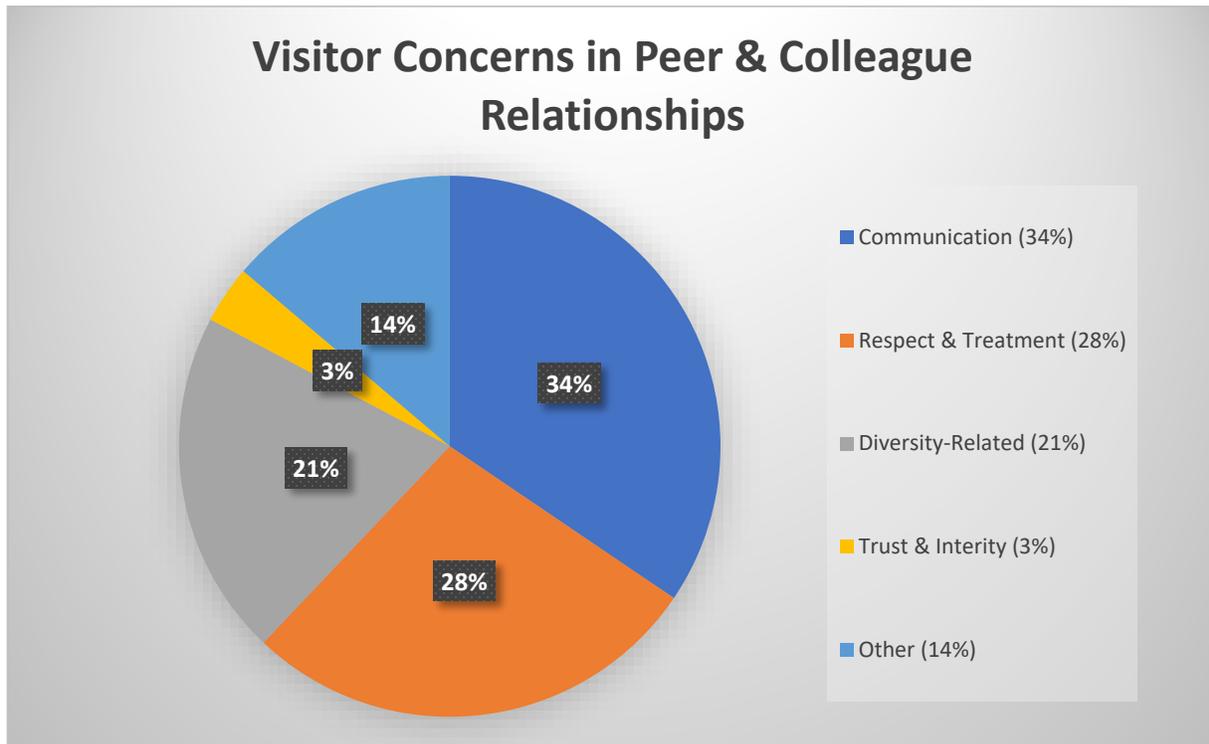
- *Impact of power differentials when experiencing biases:* A few visitors noted that the biggest problem when experiencing bias at work was when it come from someone with power over them or in a greater position of power in general. These visitors noted that not only does it make raising the concern difficult because they fear the impact it might have on their career, but it also normalizes the behavior for others.
- *Difficult and unproductive process for raising concerns:* Some visitors found it challenging to raise diversity-related concerns. They felt that there was not a good process or forum for their concerns to be heard, and if they did raise a concern, that nothing would change as a result. A couple visitors noted that after raising a concern, they felt like they were being guilted for making their supervisor feel bad (ex. “I can’t believe you would think I’m racist”).
- *Concerns about being viewed as “racist” or “sexist”:* One visitor directly noted this, but it was an underlying theme in all other interactions that fell within this category. Employees are concerned about being viewed as racist or sexist for doing something they perceive as small and/or unintentional. This fear makes it difficult for those experiencing such biases to raise their concerns and find a reasonable result.

### Other Concerns: 31%

The remaining 31% of visitor concerns in evaluative relationships spanned several different categories, including trust and integrity, departmental climate, priorities and values, and bullying. Examples of concerns from this category include:

- Two visitors sought assistance regarding Performance Improvement Plans (PIP). One sought clarification for the terms of their PIP, while the other sought advice for creating and communicating a PIP with an employee.
- One instance of bullying accounted for 4% of all visitor concerns in evaluative relationships. The issue was resolved.
- A professor was accused of doing something that they said they did not do. The ombuds helped them draft a letter, navigate the appeals process, and work with university leadership.
- A manager worked with the ombuds to deal with an employee who they felt was chronically dishonest.
- An employee was disciplined after being told they would not be disciplined, and the ombuds helped them identify next steps with Human Resources.

## Peer & Colleague Relationships



Almost 20% of concerns raised by visitors related to their peer and colleague relationships. Within this category, the top concerns were spread quite closely among three categories:

#### Communication: 34%

- *Departmental tension and dysfunction:* The majority of visitors who wanted to discuss communication with their peers and colleagues were seeking to navigate long-standing tensions or dysfunctional relationships within their departments. Visitors recognized that these communication and relationship challenges inhibited their ability to collaborate, work productively, and engage in group decision-making. Concerns included individuals who displayed “toxic” behaviors that “tanked” meetings and progress and difficulty resolving disagreements or differences of opinion without getting emotional or personal.
- *Concerns for graduate students’ mental wellness and satisfaction:* One department raised concern for their graduate students’ mental health and overall wellness, concerned that they were unable to discuss these concerns with their PIs or advisors about these issues. Visitors sought to open up a safe and productive avenue for students to communicate such concerns and feedback within the department.
- *Resolving disputes and making amends:* A few visitors contacted the ombuds seeking to resolve an interpersonal dispute with a co-worker or for assistance making amends for a situation in which they knew they were in the wrong.

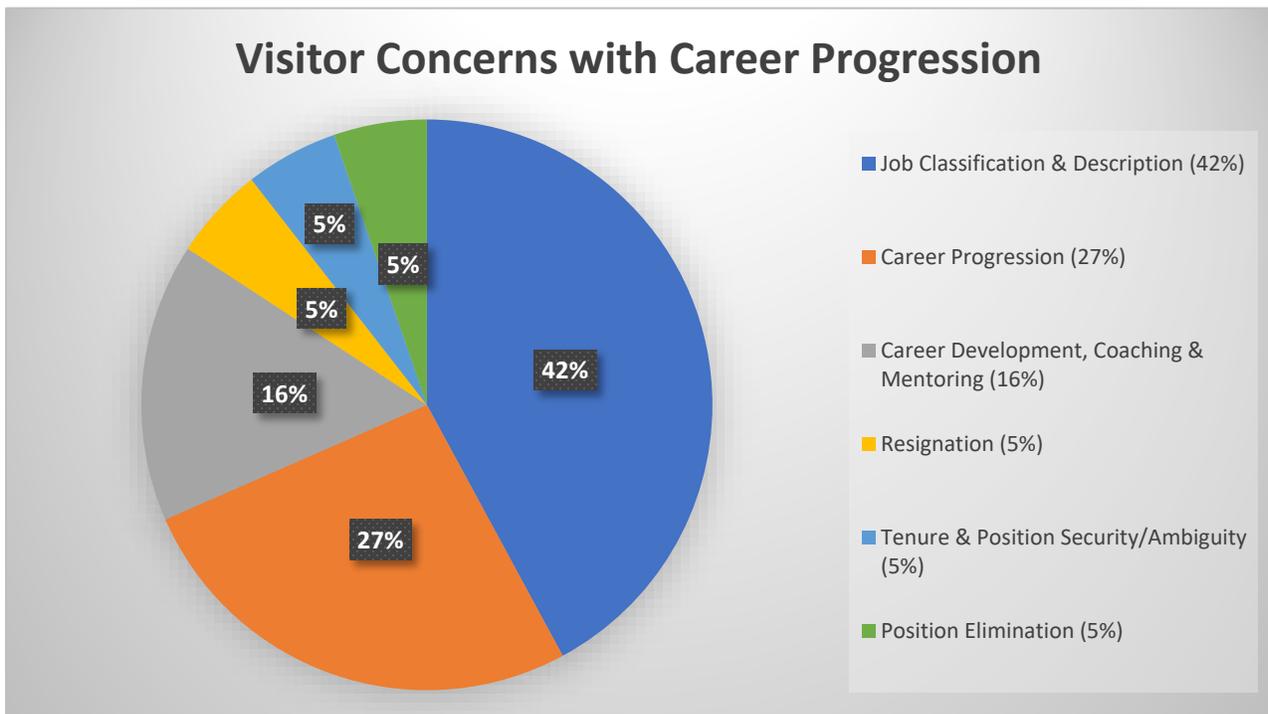
### Respect & Treatment: 28%

- *Disrespectful professional communication and tone:* Instances included a colleague sending emails lacking respect in their tone and language, a co-worker “bad-mouthing” others, name-calling, yelling, and a colleague’s negative tone and behavior affecting the overall climate within the workplace.
- *Inappropriate or ineffective feedback:* A couple visitors mentioned that their colleagues provided them with feedback that was inappropriate in its delivery, content, and tone. Whether the colleague was being inappropriate or merely ineffective in their delivery, these visitors felt that the feedback was out of line and uncalled for.

### Diversity-Related: 21%

- *Demeaning and isolating female faculty:* One department contacted the ombuds reporting that female faculty were told, “You only got hired because you’re a minority.” Colleagues refused to collaborate with female faculty.
- *Racist micro-aggressions and difficulty receiving feedback about behaviors:* A few visitors cited instances of their colleagues using racist dog-whistles or microaggressions. When they attempted to raise these concerns, they felt that they were gaslighted into thinking that they were overreacting or guilty for making the other person feel bad for their behavior. The other person’s behavior was excused because “that’s just them.”

## Career Progression & Development



Just over 10% of all visitor concerns related to career progression and development. Within this category, the top concerns were:

#### Job Classification & Description: 42%

The majority of visitors in this category wanted to discuss role reclassification and how it would impact them. Others sought to clarify the scope, expectations, or duties of their job.

#### Career Progression: 27%

Visitors in this category sought to understand why their career progression was stagnant or how to manage barriers to their career advancement. Examples include:

- An employee applied for a new job within the university, but they were concerned when they discovered that their current supervisor was on the search committee for that job. The ombuds discussed the visitor's concerns and provided more information about their supervisor's role on the search committee. The visitor closed the matter satisfied that their supervisor would speak about them on the merits on the job.
- A professor wondered why their salary and advancement remained stagnant, despite their impressive publication record. The ombuds convened a mediation with the visitor and the department chair, and they were able to reach an agreement about the visitor's concerns.

## Organizational, Strategic & Mission-Related



Almost 10% of all visitor concerns were related to overall organization, strategy, and mission of their team, department, or the university as a whole. Over half of all concerns in this category were related to communication. Visitors sought to better understand their organizations' communication issues, and they worked towards a strategy for improving communication overall. One visitor raised concerns about communication regarding COVID-19, including testing expectations and results of testing data, in a consistent and timely fashion.

Almost 30% of concerns in this category related to leadership and management. One matter involving several visitors brought up concerns about unsafe working conditions, lack of pay increases, and a mass exodus of employees, all of which they felt was the result of a lack of leadership, strategy, and vision from management. A couple other visitors contacted the ombuds regarding disputes among their leadership team.

### Other Visitor Concerns

- Pay and compensation concerns accounted for 4% of all visitors. Their specific concerns spanned the following:
  - *Pay equity*: These visitors were not or felt they were not paid at the rate as others similarly situated.
  - *Pay transparency*: These visitors sought more information about what the pay grade for their position should be.

- *Added workload for stagnant pay:* Examples include professors who take on additional students for no additional pay, increasing their overall workload, and an employee whose promotion was approved but the increased salary they were offered was not approved.
- Legal, regulatory, and compliance concerns also accounted for 4% of all visitors. Concerns mostly involved claims of harassment and discrimination. In these cases, the visitor was either referred to the appropriate office for assistance, a mediated discussion was held among the affected parties, or the visitor closed the case. There was also a complaint that a supervisor was not implementing the mask-wearing policy.

***Breakdown by Role***

The top visitor concerns for each role are listed below:

**Faculty: 56 visitors**

1. Communication with supervisor	12.5%
2. Respect/treatment with supervisor	9%
2. Organizational, strategic, & mission-related	9%
3. Career progression & development	7%
3. Communication with peers	7%
4. Diversity-related concerns with peers	5%
4. Performance appraisal/grading	5%

***Professional & Scientific Staff: 60 visitors***

1. Job classification & description	8%
1. Communication with peers	8%
2. Compensation	6.50%
2. Trust/integrity of supervisor	6.50%
2. Communication with supervisor	6.50%
2. Diversity-related concern with supervisor	6.50%
2. Discrimination & harassment	6.50%
3. Respect/treatment with supervisor	5%
3. Respect/treatment with peers	5%

***Graduate & Professional Students: 34 visitors***

1. Communication with supervisor	21%
2. Supervisor effectiveness	18%
3. Organizational, strategic, & mission-related	15%
4. Career progression & development	12%
5. Respect/treatment with supervisor	6%

**Merit Staff: 10 visitors**

- |   |     |
|---|-----|
| 1. Organizational, strategic, & mission-related | 40% |
| 2. Concern with supervisor                      | 30% |
| 3. Communication & respect with peer            | 20% |
| 4. Cleanliness in work environment              | 10% |

**Post-Doctoral Students: 1 visitor**

- |                              |      |
|------------------------------|------|
| 1. Supervisory effectiveness | 100% |
|------------------------------|------|

**Not Identified: 3 visitors**

- |                                      |     |
|--------------------------------------|-----|
| 1. Respect/treatment with supervisor | 30% |
| 2. Respect/treatment with peers      | 30% |
| 3. Job classification & description  | 30% |

## Ombuds Action

The Ombuds Office implemented the following solutions to help visitors resolve their concerns:

- Provided informal communication facilitation on behalf of visitors
- Conducted mediations
  - Examples from cases: facilitated a conversation between major professor and faculty member over gendered use of language, helped faculty resolve a long-standing dispute about interdepartmental dynamics, and mediated between two parties regarding the annual review process and the employee's outcome
- Facilitated a meeting for a group needing help designing an agenda and resolving issues in a productive meeting
- Led facilitated department-wide meeting to help build working relationships and improve communication
- Designed a more productive & inclusive committee meeting agenda
- Referred visitor to a therapist to manage personal issues/emotions that were having an impact on their work
- Helped several visitors write a letter to the person they were concerned with (see Appendix B)
- Relayed visitor concerns and requests to Provost
- Helped a visitor elevate concerns with DEI leadership committee
- Practiced conversational skills with a visitor prior to discussing an issue with their co-worker
- Helped a visitor prepare to apologize for hurtful remarks they made to a colleague
- Supported a manager in creating and communicating a Performance Improvement Plan (PIP) for an employee
- Assisted in resolving visitor concerns about unethical and inappropriate behavior from faculty and staff
- Facilitated departmental concerns about workplace climate
- Relayed issues relating to diversity, equity and inclusion to appropriate university channels and resources.

## Feedback to the Ombuds Office

MWI solicited anonymous, voluntary feedback from visitors once their matter with the ombuds office was considered closed. Visitors received and were invited to complete a survey via email, where they were able to provide more information about their experience working with the ombuds and any progress made regarding their concern.

80% of respondents reported an overall positive experience working with the Ombuds Office. Almost all these responses cited feeling heard and the ombud's listening skills as an important aspect of their experience. Others appreciated how the ombuds was able to bring parties together in a productive manner, effectively facilitating important conversations that were difficult in the past.

Examples of positive feedback include:

*I have called the Ombuds twice and had a positive experience (and positive outcomes) both times; I would not hesitate to call again in the future. I also recommend the Ombuds as a resource to my colleagues.*

*I worked with Chuck Doran and really appreciated the experience. As department Chair, I was dealing with a challenging personnel situation and Chuck did an excellent job working with individuals on both sides of the issue. I feel ISU is fortunate to have his services.*

*The ombuds I worked with was amazing. She helped me to clarify what my issues were, and what I could do to improve my situation. I have made some changes and am so much happier and more satisfied with my work situation now. THANK YOU!*

*All in all, it went alright, certainly better than expected. I wanted to thank you for your guidance and assistance with this delicate matter, as I don't believe it would have been as successful without us having spoke.*

We found that a fifth of respondents reported a mixed or negative working with the ombuds office. The negative feedback centered around the ombud's inability to resolve the visitor's problem. In one instance, the ombuds office was not able take action requested by the visitor, and in another, the ombuds was frustrated that their matter was still pending with ISU administration.

Mixed feedback centered largely around a matter involving several visitors, in which the visitors were unsatisfied with the first ombuds who managed their case. MWI responded by providing a different ombuds, and this alleviated concerns. Other frustrations cited included the fact that the ombuds could not force employees to take part in conversations or mediations and that having their concerns resolved took a long time. A couple respondents also expressed doubt that the administration truly cared to hear their concerns, even after resolving their issue through the ombuds.

## Ombuds Recommendations

Visitors made the following recommendations in their interactions with the ombuds:

- Invest more time, resources, and prioritize training and development, specifically in management, communication, and diversity, equity, inclusion and belonging (DEIB).
- Hold regular, facilitated town hall meetings to share information, hear concerns, and productively manage communications.
- Conduct a survey of graduate students to assess their satisfaction and wellness within their work and to garner their feedback for how the department can improve.
- One visitor detailed an idea for a conflict resolution process: “Perhaps there is way to create a departmental process that might optionally include a ‘rapid response’ protocol to nip potential blow-ups in the bud. This is not to silence complaints but to give them a rapid hearing. I think that unstructured public email is not the best way to ensure hearing as well as due process. Designing such a process seems to me to be a possible positive outcome of our current conversation. DEIC (the Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Committee) could be involved (though shouldn't be directly/solely responsible).” The visitor also mentioned that this process should include graduate students as well. The Ombuds Office can provide such a forum, and updated marketing and communication materials can make this clear.

Based on the ombuds’ work and the data contained in this report, MWI recommends the following action for ISU in response to visitors’ concerns:

- *Design a more effective system for delivering feedback and annual performance evaluations:* Faculty and staff benefit from receiving feedback throughout the year, which allows them to incorporate it and improve throughout the year. Currently, at least some employees are receiving all of their feedback during their annual performance evaluation review, which may cause them to feel blind-sided by unexpected negative feedback and wonder why it wasn’t shared earlier in the year when they could have acted upon it. A more effective system for delivering feedback requires that consistent, regular feedback is delivered throughout the year, either formally or as needed, and it ensures that the annual performance evaluation does not contain any surprises or feedback that would have been helpful for the employee to improve.
- *Improve systems for collecting data on visitors’ gender and race:* When collecting demographic data regarding a visitor’s gender and race, the Ombuds Office must balance their interest in collecting this data, the accuracy of the data, and the impact that being asked for this data might have on the visitor. Ombuds should allow visitors to self-report their gender and race; assumptions should not be made in any circumstance. The timing and nature of a request of this information should take into account a visitor’s comfort and potential concerns it may raise for them. Rather than relying on a follow-up survey, the ombuds could directly ask for this information early in the process, assuring the visitor that the data will be anonymized so they

are not identifiable and answering any questions or concerns raised by the visitor. The ombuds can also use best judgment if they feel the visitor would be more comfortable if asked later in the process or through a different channel, such as a follow-up survey. The visitor can also request to report such information through a survey as well.

- *Invest in communication skills training:* The top concern raised by visitors was communication. This was a top concern in evaluative relationships, peer and colleague relationships, and organizational and strategic/mission-related concerns. Because of the size of this concern among visitors, ISU could prevent such concerns in the future through investing in faculty, student, and staff communication training. Topics could include:
  - How to deliver feedback and a performance evaluation
  - How to lead productive conversations when people disagree
  - How to facilitate productive meetings
  - How to create a safe space for employees to raise DEIB concerns (how to hear their concerns, validate their experience, process your own emotional response, and find meaningful solutions). Bystander training may also be helpful to normalize the act of naming instances of racism and sexism in the workplace.

# INTERNATIONAL OMBUDSMAN ASSOCIATION

## Uniform Reporting Categories

**VERSION 2**  
**October 2007**

### 1. Compensation & Benefits

Questions, concerns, issues or inquiries about the equity, appropriateness and competitiveness of employee compensation, benefits and other benefit programs.

- 1.a **Compensation** (rate of pay, salary amount, job salary classification/level)
- 1.b **Payroll** (administration of pay, check wrong or delayed)
- 1.c **Benefits** (decisions related to medical, dental, life, vacation/sick leave, education, worker's compensation insurance, etc.)
- 1.d **Retirement, Pension** (eligibility, calculation of amount, retirement pension benefits)
- 1.e **Other** (any other employee compensation or benefit not described by the above sub-categories)

### 2. Evaluative Relationships

Questions, concerns, issues or inquiries arising between people in evaluative relationships (i.e. supervisor-employee, faculty-student.)

- 2.a **Priorities, Values, Beliefs** (differences about what should be considered important – or most important – often rooted in ethical or moral beliefs)
- 2.b **Respect/Treatment** (demonstrations of inappropriate regard for people, not listening, rudeness, crudeness, etc.)
- 2.c **Trust/Integrity** (suspicion that others are not being honest, whether or to what extent one wishes to be honest, etc.)
- 2.d **Reputation** (possible impact of rumors and/or gossip about professional or personal matters)
- 2.e **Communication** (quality and/or quantity of communication)
- 2.f **Bullying, Mobbing** (abusive, threatening, and/or coercive behaviors)
- 2.g **Diversity-Related** (comments or behaviors perceived to be insensitive, offensive, or intolerant on the basis of an identity-related difference such as race, gender, nationality, sexual orientation)
- 2.h **Retaliation** (punitive behaviors for previous actions or comments, whistleblower)
- 2.i **Physical Violence** (actual or threats of bodily harm to another)
- 2.j **Assignments/Schedules** (appropriateness or fairness of tasks, expected volume of work)
- 2.k **Feedback** (feedback or recognition given, or responses to feedback received)
- 2.l **Consultation** (requests for help in dealing with issues between two or more individuals they supervise/teach or with other unusual situations in evaluative relationships)

### 2.m Performance Appraisal/Grading

(job/academic performance in formal or informal evaluation)

- 2.n **Departmental Climate** (prevailing behaviors, norms, or attitudes within a department for which supervisors or faculty have responsibility.)
- 2.o **Supervisory Effectiveness** (management of department or classroom, failure to address issues)
- 2.p **Insubordination** (refusal to do what is asked)
- 2.q **Discipline** (appropriateness, timeliness, requirements, alternatives, or options for responding)
- 2.r **Equity of Treatment** (favoritism, one or more individuals receive preferential treatment)
- 2.s **Other** (any other evaluative relationship not described by the above sub-categories)

### 3. Peer and Colleague Relationships

Questions, concerns, issues or inquiries involving peers or colleagues who do not have a supervisory-employee or student-professor relationship (e.g., two staff members within the same department or conflict involving members of a student organization.)

- 3.a **Priorities, Values, Beliefs** (differences about what should be considered important – or most important – often rooted in ethical or moral beliefs)
- 3.b **Respect/Treatment** (demonstrations of inappropriate regard for people, not listening, rudeness, crudeness, etc.)
- 3.c **Trust/Integrity** (suspicion that others are not being honest, whether or to what extent one wishes to be honest, etc.)
- 3.d **Reputation** (possible impact of rumors and/or gossip about professional or personal matters)
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- 3.g **Diversity-Related** (comments or behaviors perceived to be insensitive, offensive, or intolerant on the basis of an identity-related difference such as race, gender, nationality, sexual orientation)
- 3.h **Retaliation** (punitive behaviors for previous actions or comments, whistleblower)
- 3.i **Physical Violence** (actual or threats of bodily harm to another)
- 3.j **Other** (any peer or colleague relationship not described by the above sub-categories)

### 4. Career Progression and Development

Questions, concerns, issues or inquiries about administrative processes and decisions regarding entering and leaving a job, what it entails, (i.e., recruitment, nature and place of assignment, job security, and separation.)

- 4.a **Job Application/Selection and Recruitment Processes** (recruitment and selection processes, facilitation of job applications, short-listing and criteria for selection, disputed decisions linked to recruitment and selection)
- 4.b **Job Classification and Description** (changes or disagreements over requirements of assignment, appropriate tasks)
- 4.c **Involuntary Transfer/Change of Assignment** (notice, selection and special dislocation rights/benefits, removal from prior duties, unrequested change of work tasks)
- 4.d **Tenure/Position Security/Ambiguity** (security of position or contract, provision of secure contractual categories)
- 4.e **Career Progression** (promotion, reappointment, or tenure)
- 4.f **Rotation and Duration of Assignment** (non-completion or over-extension of assignments in specific settings/countries, lack of access or involuntary transfer to specific roles/assignments, requests for transfer to other places/duties/roles)
- 4.g **Resignation** (concerns about whether or how to voluntarily terminate employment or how such a decision might be communicated appropriately)
- 4.h **Termination/Non-Renewal** (end of contract, non-renewal of contract, disputed permanent separation from organization)
- 4.i **Re-employment of Former or Retired Staff** (loss of competitive advantages associated with re-hiring retired staff, favoritism)
- 4.j **Position Elimination** (elimination or abolition of an individual's position)
- 4.k **Career Development, Coaching, Mentoring** (classroom, on-the-job, and varied assignments as training and developmental opportunities)
- 4.l **Other** (any other issues linked to recruitment, assignment, job security or separation not described by the above sub-categories)

## 5. Legal, Regulatory, Financial and Compliance

Questions, concerns, issues or inquiries that may create a legal risk (financial, sanction etc.) for the organization or its members if not addressed, including issues related to waste, fraud or abuse.

- 5.a **Criminal Activity** (threats or crimes planned, observed, or experienced, fraud)
- 5.b **Business and Financial Practices** (inappropriate actions that abuse or waste organizational finances, facilities or equipment)
- 5.c **Harassment** (unwelcome physical, verbal, written, e-mail, audio, video psychological or sexual conduct that creates a hostile or intimidating environment)
- 5.d **Discrimination** (different treatment compared with others or exclusion from some benefit on the basis of, for example, gender, race, age, national origin, religion, etc.[being part of an Equal Employment Opportunity protected category – applies in the U.S.] )
- 5.e **Disability, Temporary or Permanent, Reasonable Accommodation** (extra time on exams, provision of assistive technology, interpreters, or Braille materials including questions on policies, etc. for people with disabilities)
- 5.f **Accessibility** (removal of physical barriers, providing ramps, elevators, etc.)
- 5.g **Intellectual Property Rights** (e.g., copyright and patent infringement)
- 5.h **Privacy and Security of Information** (release or access to individual or organizational private or confidential information)
- 5.i **Property Damage** (personal property damage, liabilities)
- 5.j **Other** (any other legal, financial and compliance issue not described by the above sub-categories)  
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## 6. Safety, Health, and Physical Environment

Questions, concerns, issues or inquiries about Safety, Health and Infrastructure-related issues.

- 6.a **Safety** (physical safety, injury, medical evacuation, meeting federal and state requirements for training and equipment)
- 6.b **Physical Working/Living Conditions** (temperature, odors, noise, available space, lighting, etc)
- 6.c **Ergonomics** (proper set-up of workstation affecting physical functioning)
- 6.d **Cleanliness** (sanitary conditions and facilities to prevent the spread of disease)
- 6.e **Security** (adequate lighting in parking lots, metal detectors, guards, limited access to building by outsiders, anti-terrorists measures (not for classifying “compromise of classified or top secret” information)

- 6.f **Telework/Flexplace** (ability to work from home or other location because of business or personal need, e.g., in case of man-made or natural emergency)
- 6.g **Safety Equipment** (access to/use of safety equipment as well as access to or use of safety equipment, e.g., fire extinguisher)
- 6.h **Environmental Policies** (policies not being followed, being unfair ineffective, cumbersome)
- 6.i **Work Related Stress and Work-Life Balance** (Post-Traumatic Stress, Critical Incident Response, internal/external stress, e.g. divorce, shooting, caring for sick, injured)
- 6.j **Other** (any safety, health, or physical environment issue not described by the above sub-categories)  
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## 7. Services/Administrative Issues

Questions, concerns, issues or inquiries about services or administrative offices including from external parties.

- 7.a **Quality of Services** (how well services were provided, accuracy or thoroughness of information, competence, etc.)
- 7.b **Responsiveness/Timeliness** (time involved in getting a response or return call or about the time for a complete response to be provided)
- 7.c **Administrative Decisions and Interpretation/Application of Rules** (impact of non-disciplinary decisions, decisions about requests for administrative and academic services, e.g., exceptions to policy deadlines or limits, refund requests, appeals of library or parking fines, application for financial aid, etc.)
- 7.d **Behavior of Service Provider(s)** (how an administrator or staff member spoke to or dealt with a constituent, customer, or client, e.g., rude, inattentive, or impatient)
- 7.e **Other** (any services or administrative issue not described by the above sub-categories)  
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## 8. Organizational, Strategic, and Mission Related

Questions, concerns, issues or inquiries that relate to the whole or some part of an organization.

- 8.a **Strategic and Mission-Related/ Strategic and Technical Management** (principles, decisions and actions related to where and how the organization is moving)
- 8.b **Leadership and Management** (quality/capacity of management and/or management/leadership decisions, suggested training, reassignments and reorganizations)

- 8.c **Use of Positional Power/Authority** (lack or abuse of power provided by individual's position)
- 8.d **Communication** (content, style, timing, effects and amount of organizational and leader's communication, quality of communication about strategic issues)
- 8.e **Restructuring and Relocation** (issues related to broad scope planned or actual restructuring and/or relocation affecting the whole or major divisions of an organization, e.g. downsizing, off shoring, outsourcing)
- 8.f **Organizational Climate** (issues related to organizational morale and/or capacity for functioning)
- 8.g **Change Management** (making, responding or adapting to organizational changes, quality of leadership in facilitating organizational change)
- 8.h **Priority Setting and/or Funding** (disputes about setting organizational/departmental priorities and/or allocation of funding within programs)
- 8.i **Data, Methodology, Interpretation of Results** (scientific disputes about the conduct, outcomes and interpretation of studies and resulting data for policy)
- 8.j **Interdepartment/Interorganization Work/Territory** (disputes about which department/organization should be doing what/taking the lead)
- 8.k **Other** (any organizational issue not described by the above sub-categories)  
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## 9. Values, Ethics, and Standards

Questions, concerns, issues or inquiries about the fairness of organizational values, ethics, and/or standards, the application of related policies and/or procedures, or the need for creation or revision of policies, and/or standards.

- 9.a **Standards of Conduct** (fairness, applicability or lack of behavioral guidelines and/or Codes of Conduct, e.g., Academic Honesty, plagiarism, Code of Conduct, conflict of interest)
- 9.b **Values and Culture** (questions, concerns or issues about the values or culture of the organization)
- 9.c **Scientific Conduct/Integrity** (scientific or research misconduct or misdemeanors, e.g., authorship; falsification of results)
- 9.d **Policies and Procedures NOT Covered in Broad Categories 1 thru 8** (fairness or lack of policy or the application of the policy, policy not followed, or needs revision, e.g., appropriate dress, use of internet or cell phones)
- 9.e **Other** (Other policy, procedure, ethics or standards issues not described in the above sub-categories)  
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## Drafting—and perhaps sending—a private letter to a person who has harassed or offended you

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If someone has offended you, you may wish to draft a letter to that person. There are many reasons to do this. If you have been very upset, drafting a letter—and writing several drafts of a letter—may make it easier for you to deal with the rage, grief or confusion. You may also find it easier to deal with your feelings—and with the offense—if you first sort out the facts from your feelings.

It will also be easier to choose an effective option for dealing with an offense if you first collect the facts, and think clearly about any damage you have suffered because of the offense. In fact *drafting a letter to someone who has offended you is an excellent preparation for many different options for dealing with the offense*. Different options might include: approaching the offender directly, in person or on paper; seeking informal third party intervention; formal mediation; formal grievance or legal suit; and systems efforts or a generic approach, to *prevent* the kind of behavior that offended you.

In addition, if you decide to postpone action, or forgo action, you may feel more comfortable having “drafted a letter.” This is because you will have collected the evidence together, in a way that may be useful in case you change your mind.

If you are not at all sure what you want to do with respect to an offense, drafting a letter costs nothing, in terms of privacy or money. In addition, you may find it is suddenly much easier to decide what to do, after you write a number of drafts of a letter.

Writing a *final* draft of this letter may take a little time. If you have been hurt, if you feel very angry, if you are at all afraid, you may find that you need to write several drafts. Do not be worried if your first draft is a messy stream-of-consciousness and if you feel confused. Do not feel you must struggle with the tone of your early drafts — they do not need to see the light of day. In fact the more upset you are, the more worthwhile it is actually to write many drafts of a letter. Reviewing and re-writing may help you to recall and organize the facts of the situation.

When one is very upset it can be hard to sleep or work; rage and grief are very distracting. People who have used the letter-writing method suggest that drafting a letter may help to “get the anger outside yourself.” If the facts are safely collected outside yourself, your mind no longer needs to struggle to remember and understand what has happened. The distraction may lessen; you may be able to sleep better. In addition, in case you decide to *send* the letter, your last (polite, factual, well-organized) draft will be more effective if early drafts have helped you deal with your feelings.

As you decide whether to send the letter, you may worry whether a direct approach to the offender will cause that person to retaliate. This is an important question to consider, but in North American society a well-prepared, direct approach to an offender may actually be the option least likely to result in retaliation. Remember that most people in this culture would rather hear about a problem directly, and not from a third party.

If you send the letter you should keep a copy; this is likely to help in dealing with the situation if there should be retaliation or if the offense recurs. Letters like this can “help to build evidence.” You may not be able to *prove* that an offense took place. But if you send a letter you can prove that you *thought* the offense took place and that you took a civil, responsible, private action to get the offense to stop.

A letter can be used by anyone who feels unreasonably offended, intimidated or harassed. It is particularly useful where people's backgrounds are different. For example energetic managers may offend older people, with allusions to age, without really understanding the offense. Ethnic slurs, religious slurs, anti-gay jokes, poking fun at the disabled, racist behavior and sexual harassment are all problems where a letter may help.

Letters have been used effectively by non-technical people who feel that "the computniks are sneering at them" and vice versa; so also with smokers vs. non-smokers. A letter may help you to deal with the garage that messed up your car. (A letter may also be a useful *response* to someone who has written you a letter of complaint if you need to present your side of the story in a polite, factual way.)

I do not recommend a "form" letter. Sometimes a brief note is better among friends. Whatever the case, the letter should fit the particular situation exactly.

*I do recommend three parts to a note or letter.* The first is an objective statement: "These are the facts as I perceive them." No feelings, judgments or opinions belong in this section. (This section may be hard to write even after many drafts. If you plan to send the letter, consider asking some trustworthy person to help you get the first section down to just facts. One test for a "fact" is whether it could have been recorded on audiotape or video tape.) In serious cases it may help for the first section to be quite long and very detailed. It must be scrupulously accurate, to be effective (and fair). The first section should not use euphemisms. It should be very matter of fact. If you are not sure whether a statement is factual, and want to include it, then say, "I believe (this happened)." "I think (this was the case)."

The second section is for opinions and feelings. "This is how the facts as I know them make me feel." This is the appropriate place for a statement of damages if any: "I feel I can no longer work with you." "I was not able to work effectively for the following two weeks." "I felt terrible about what you did."

Finally you should state clearly what you think should happen next, and, if appropriate, you can ask for a specific remedy. "I ask that our relationship be on a purely professional basis from now on." "I want a chance to go over my work with you again and to reconsider my evaluation (grade)." "Since I was unable to go on this sales trip because of your behavior, I want immediate assignment to the next trip." Sometimes you might wish to request a sum of money, if that is an appropriate remedy.

Many people ask if a letter really should be the first or the only attempt to deal with offensive behavior. Of course the answer depends on the people and the problem, and it depends what you want out of the situation. Criminal acts may better be brought to the attention of supervisors and/or the courts. Those routes might also be the best if you believe "that the offender should pay for what he or she did." At the other end of the spectrum you might wish to draft a letter — and then not send it. (You could also consider forgetting an incident in the spirit of tolerance of diversity.) Also, many people prefer to try talking with an offender before sending a letter, and there are many ways to do this effectively. Or you can talk with the offender after giving the letter to him or her.

A letter may be an especially effective choice when verbal remonstrance has been ignored. It can be especially useful with sexual harassment, with offenders who believe that "no" means "maybe" or "yes." A letter may work well in situations where an offender seems to have no idea of the pain being caused, that is, for people who "just don't get it." Writing a letter may be particularly helpful when an offended person fears to come forward because she or he lacks conclusive proof of the offense, or where the offended person wishes to avoid the situation of "his word against mine." Letters are useful in addition to the hope of stopping offensive behavior; they provide more evidence for management or a court to take action if necessary. For example a letter can provide evidence that you indeed found a certain behavior offensive. Letters are especially effective in dealing with very powerful people where a junior person otherwise has little leverage or fears retaliation. Writing a letter may provide hope of ending harassment when you wish to avoid public exposure, and to protect your privacy, if, for example, "all you want is for the harassment to stop."

Letters are especially useful where a school or corporation has well-drafted policies against (all forms of) harassment. They work best where there are responsible grievance counselors to help in sorting out alternatives and in drafting letters. They may however be written anywhere by any responsible person seeking in an orderly way to stop offensive behavior. A letter may be a good choice when you particularly wish to be scrupulously fair, (because no supervisor need see the letter). And letters often work well in union situations, for example, worker with co-worker.

Once the letter is written, your actually sending the letter to an offender should be carefully weighed against other alternatives. As you think about this option, remember that once the letter is sent, that copy belongs to the recipient, who then has control over it. The recipient may tell other people, and may write you back to “set the record straight.” Would that be OK? Should you instead send a formal complaint letter to a supervisor? Should you now go talk with a trusted colleague, or personal or legal counselor? Would you prefer to talk with a family friend or your spouse?

Sending a letter is an option that may protect your privacy, avoid retaliation, and get offensive behavior to stop. Being able to prove that you sent a letter may provide you with more evidence, if needed. However letter-writing is not certain to work and you will want to consider other options carefully. If you want your letter to be a private communication, I usually do not recommend sending copies to third persons, since they may decide to act on the matter—unless you do indeed wish them to take action.

If you decide to bring a *formal* complaint, then revise your letter as a grievance, and address it to the department head or higher supervisor of the offender (or to another appropriate person). Either way, be sure to keep a copy of the letter, and proof that you sent it, (the statement of a friend who watched you deliver it, a registration receipt, or whatever made sense for this letter). These proofs may be needed for evidence.

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