

2014-2015

Office of the Provost and Vice President for  
Academic Affairs

The University of Texas at San Antonio



**[ANNUAL REPORT –  
ACADEMIC AFFAIRS  
OMBUDSPERSON 2014-  
2015]**

## **Introduction**

Albert Einstein once said, “Problems cannot be solved at the same level of awareness that created them.”<sup>1</sup> Employees within organizations sometimes have differing perceptions, complaints, concerns, and questions that require consideration and resolution. Universities have traditionally sought resolution through formal grievance procedures. These are often time-consuming and the outcome may not always be satisfactory. As part of the Office of the Provost and Vice President for Academic Affairs at The University of Texas at San Antonio, the Academic Affairs (AA) Ombudsperson is available to make the most of opportunities for informal resolution.

## **What is an Ombudsperson?**

The term *ombudsman*, meaning representative, finds its origins in the Swedish language. According to the International Ombudsman Association (IOA), an Ombudsman is an individual who serves the community as “a designated neutral” within a specific organization.<sup>2</sup> The guiding principles of the position provide for confidential, informal, independent, and neutral assistance using various problem-solving methods.

## **Role of the Academic Affairs Ombudsperson**

Based on the guiding principles of the IOA, the primary role of the AA Ombudsperson is to assist faculty, staff, and student employees who encounter challenges within the Division of Academic Affairs. Services include listening to and discussing questions or concerns, providing and clarifying information, identifying and evaluating options, acting as a facilitator or mediator, serving as a referral agent and making recommendations for change to enhance the mission of the university.

The AA Ombudsperson offers confidential services to all faculty, staff, and student employees in a safe and welcoming environment. Exceptions to this confidentiality are made with the permission of the visitor, or if it is a violation of university policy or the law, or if there is a perceived imminent risk to self or others. The position does not advocate on behalf of any one person or group, but will advocate for an unbiased process and consider the rights and concerns of all those involved. The AA Ombudsperson communicates with various representatives and offices to respond to and help resolve concerns in a timely manner.

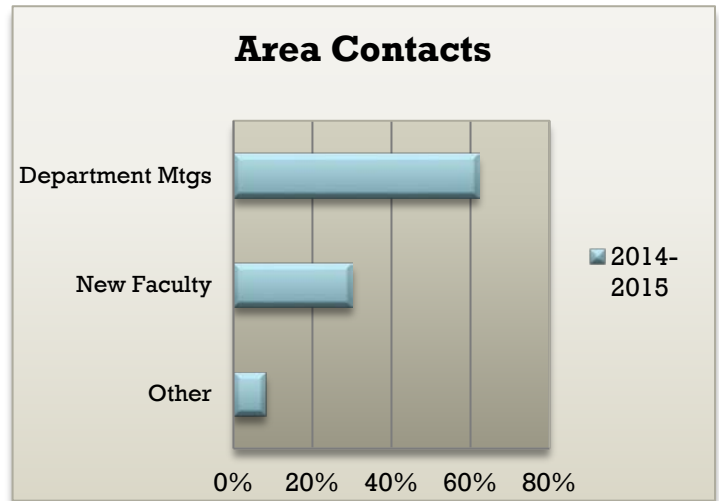
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<sup>1</sup> “Albert Einstein Quotes,” Albert Einstein Site Online, last modified Jan. 8, 2012, accessed June 5, 2014, <http://www.alberteinstein.com/quotes/einsteinquotes.html#general>.

<sup>2</sup> “What is an Organizational Ombudsman?” The International Ombudsman Association, 2007-2014, accessed June 5, 2014, <https://www.ombudsassociation.org/Resources/Frequently-Asked-Questions.aspx>.

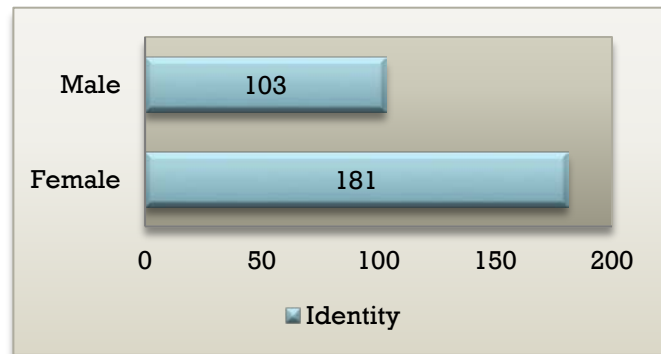
## Demographics

Between September 2014 and August 2015, the Academic Affairs Ombudsperson made 108 individual contacts based on invitations and solicitations. The majority of visits were academic department meetings (62%), new faculty (30%), and other (8%), which includes staff offices within Academic Affairs, Business Affairs, and Student Affairs. During the 2014-2015 academic year, the AA Ombudsperson did not visit with governing councils of the university. The office will revisit these areas in the future if necessary or as changes warrant.



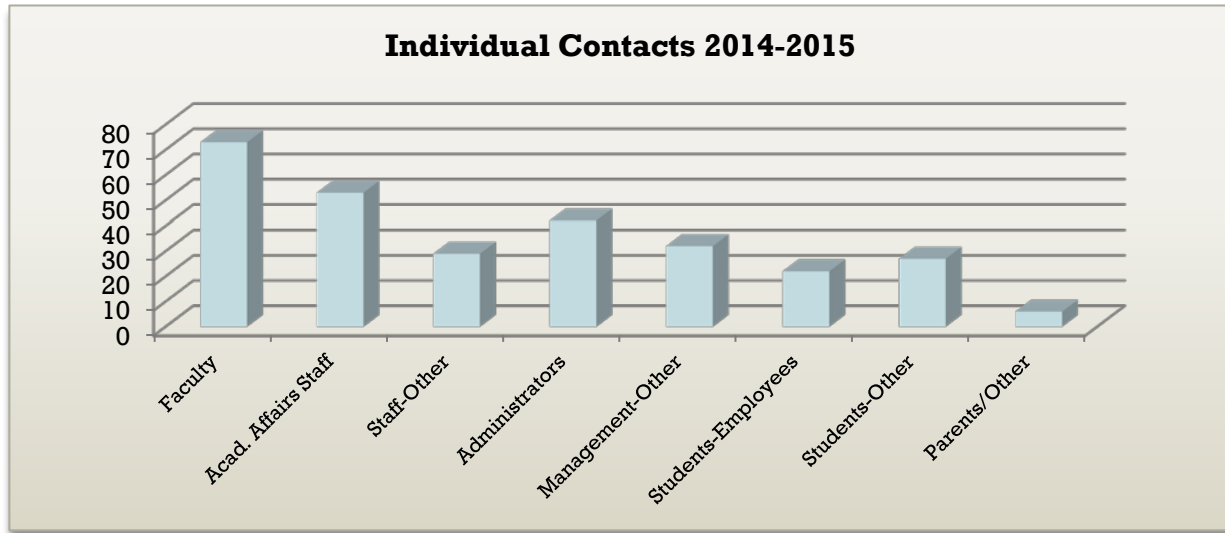
## Identity

Of the 284 individual visitors served this year, 64% were female. One reason may be that women are more likely to seek help. Another reason may be that women are more likely to have concerns about the workplace. Each year this office has seen more females than males.



## **Individual Visits**

The AA Ombudsperson served 284 visitors between September 2014 and August 2015. Academic Affairs faculty, staff, and student employees constituted 67% of visits. Students who contacted this office for non-employee related issues were referred to the UTSA student ombudsperson.



Individual visits include the following:

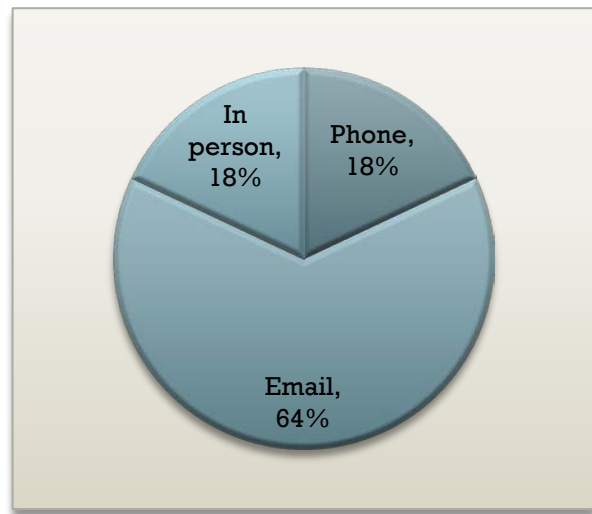
- ❖ Faculty from various colleges and departments
- ❖ Academic Affairs staff (non-faculty) within various offices
- ❖ Administrators are department chairs or higher

- ❖ Student employees in academic offices/labs working 19 hour or less
- ❖ Staff/other are divisions other than Academic Affairs
- ❖ Management/other are assistant directors or higher outside Academic Affairs
- ❖ Students/other are nonemployee referrals
- ❖ Parents/other are inquiries by parents, guardians, or outside agent

### **Contact Type**

Contacts were primarily via email followed by phone conversations, and in person meetings\*. The office received no individual letters during this recording period.

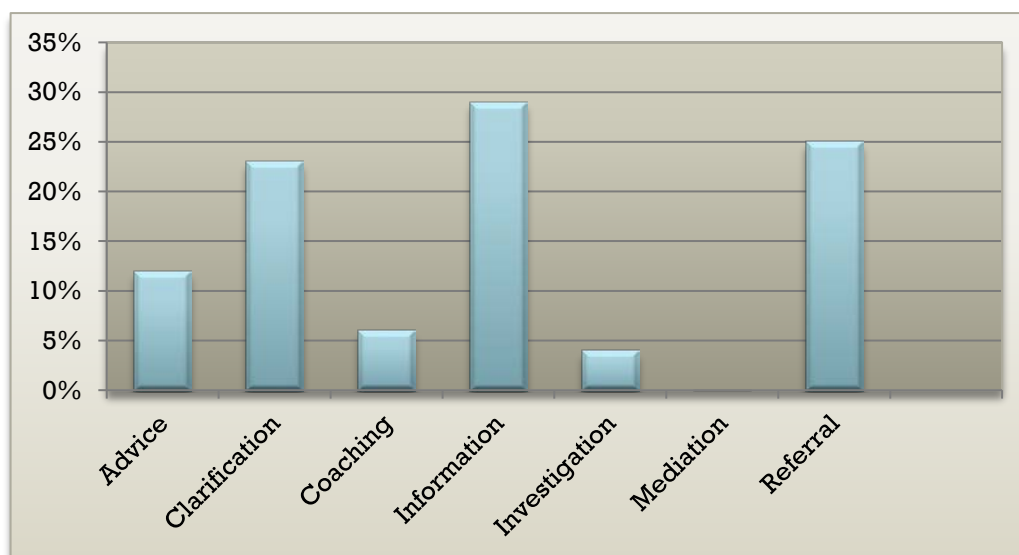
(\* In person meetings took place in the ombudsperson's office as well as other campus locations including the Downtown Campus)



### **Action Taken**

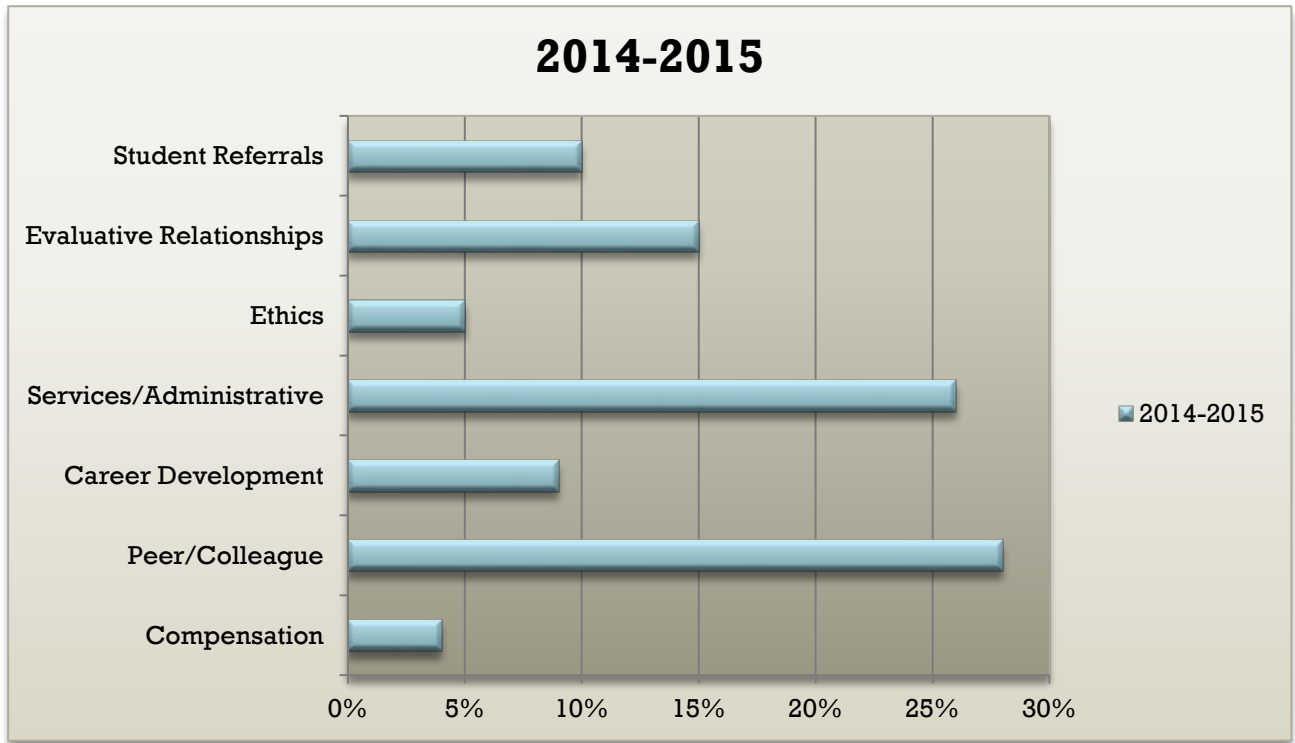
Information, referrals, and clarification were actions most often used for individuals seeking assistance through the AA Ombudsperson office. These actions were followed by advice, coaching, and in a few instances, investigation. Mediation occurred once during the year and was statistically negligible. Occasionally, individuals would visit to offer suggestions for improvements to university processes or functions and this information was shared with the appropriate offices. Identities were kept confidential.

Note: In some cases, multiple actions were used.



### **Areas of Concern**

Areas of concern crossed divisions encompassing Academic Affairs, Business Affairs, Student Affairs, and Research. Concerns expressed fell into several broad categories: compensation, evaluative relationships, peer/colleague relationships, career development, services or administrative issues, and ethics. Within these categories subcategories developed including communication, faculty courses, personnel issues, academic advising, customer service, and faculty travel. Research ethics, student employee concerns, salary equity, PeopleSoft, and FERPA were also of concern. Non-student employee questions and situations were referred to the student ombudsperson. In some instances, collaboration between both offices was necessary to resolve issues.



A further explanation of the subcategories below will provide context on the types of assistance conveyed to the AA Ombudsperson.

Communication

- Concerns about information flow
- Lack of communication between supervisors and staff
- Inquiries about confidentiality and neutrality

Faculty Courses

- Concerns about fairness
- Inquiries about process
- Concerns over inequality
- Assertions of retaliation

Personnel Issues

- Employee/supervisor relationship concerns
- Assertions of retaliation
- Concerns over inequality
- Allegations of differential treatment

Advising

- Concerns over lack of clarity
- Concerns about fairness
- Inquiries about process



### Customer Service

- Inquiries about process
- Assisted with understanding the process
- Concerns over lack of training

### Faculty Travel

- Inquiries about travel payment process
- Concerns over lack of training
- Questions about process, timeline, signatures
- Concern about not being paid in a timely manner

### Research Ethics

- Concerns about research practice
- Employee/supervisor relationship concerns
- Assertions of retaliation
- Allegations of differential treatment

### Student Employee Concerns

- Concerns over frequency of student employees losing positions
- Inquiries about the process
- Concern about not being paid in a timely manner

### FERPA {UTSA and non-UTSA contacts}

- Inquiries about policy
- Assisted in understanding process/policy

### PeopleSoft Concerns

- Inquiries about process
- Concerns over lack of training

### University Policy

- Inquiries about process
- Concerns over lack of clarity

### Promotion/Tenure

- Concerns about fairness
- Inquiries about process
- Assisted in understanding process

### Faculty Development Leave

- Inquiries about the process
- Concerns over lack of clarity



### OIT

- Inquiries about process
- Concerns over lack of training

### Facility Services

- Inquiries about process
- Concerns over lack of training

Non-student employee related concerns were referrals to the student ombudsperson, but in some cases, there was a need for collaboration between the offices.

### Student Courses

- Concerns over lack of clarity
- Concerns with lack of communication
- Most were referred

### Student Grades

- Concerns with lack of communication
- Most were referred

### Student Activities

- Referred to Student Ombudsperson

In most circumstances, questions and concerns were resolved by providing assistance with information, clarification or in some instances direct communication with an on-campus representative. Communication was positive and productive which assisted in a timely resolution of most issues. To determine the best course of action, in some circumstances further investigation, and/or discussion was required. The ombudsperson made referrals in a some cases and coaching in other cases.

### **Training/Outreach**

At the request of various Academic Affairs offices, approximately 142 staff and student employees participated in True Colors training provided by this office.

### **Recommendations**

Information in this report provides a snapshot of some of the factors that contribute to conflict within the workplace. Recommendations shared with various stakeholders included topics described above. Confidentiality was a priority and only issues were discussed. The Academic Affairs Ombudsperson shared concerns over communication and services that crossed division lines. These discussions included recommendations to improve communication to the UTSA community.

**Contact Information**

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