

2015-2016

Office of the Senior Vice Provost for Academic
and Faculty Support

The University of Texas at San Antonio



**[ANNUAL REPORT –
ACADEMIC AFFAIRS
OMBUDSPERSON 2015-
2016]**

Introduction

Albert Einstein once said, “Problems cannot be solved at the same level of awareness that created them.”¹ 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.² 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.

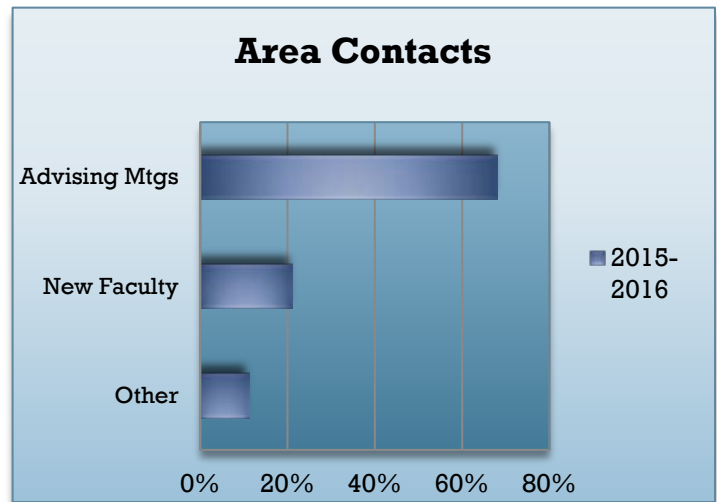
The AA Ombudsperson offers confidential services to all faculty, staff, and student employees in a safe and welcoming environment. Exceptions to this confidentiality are made with the permission of the visitor, or if it is a violation of University policy or the law, or if there is a perceived imminent 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. In May of 2016, the reporting line of the AA Ombudsperson was transferred under the Senior Vice Provost for Academic and Faculty Support.

¹ “Albert Einstein Quotes,” Albert Einstein Site Online, last modified Jan. 8, 2012, accessed June 5, 2015, <http://www.alberteinstein.com/quotes/einsteinquotes.html#general>.

² “What is an Organizational Ombudsman?” The International Ombudsman Association, 2007-2015, accessed June 5, 2015, <https://www.ombudsassociation.org/Resources/Frequently-Asked-Questions.aspx>.

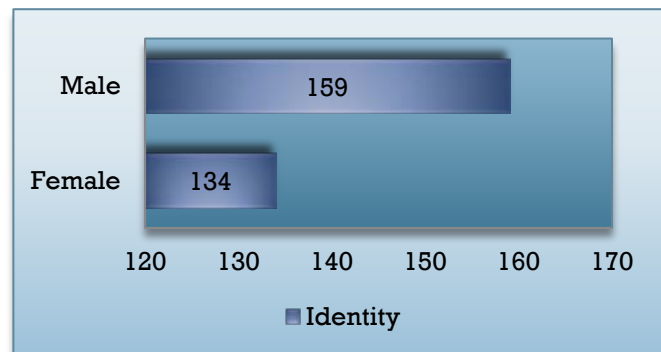
Area Contacts

Between September 2015 and August 2016, the Academic Affairs Ombudsperson engaged in minimal area contacts. In collaboration with the Associate Dean of Students, the majority of visits were academic advising meetings (68%). These were facilitated visits. Other visitations included new faculty (21%), and other (11%) offices within Academic Affairs, Business Affairs, and Student Affairs. During the 2015-2016 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.



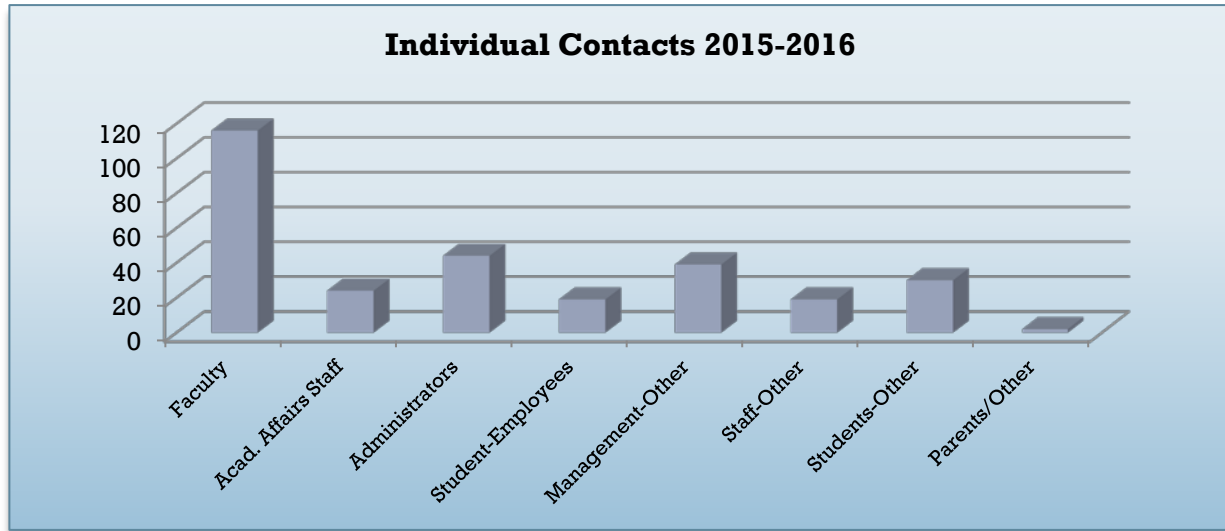
Identity

Of the 293 individual visitors served this year, 55% were male. This is a shift from previous years. One reason for the increase in male visitors may be the way policy includes discussions with the Ombudsperson.



Individual Contacts

The AA Ombudsperson served 293 visitors between September 2015 and August 2016. Academic Affairs faculty, administrators, staff, and student employees constituted 69% of visits. Students who contacted this office for non-employee related issues were referred to the Student Affairs Student Ombudsperson.



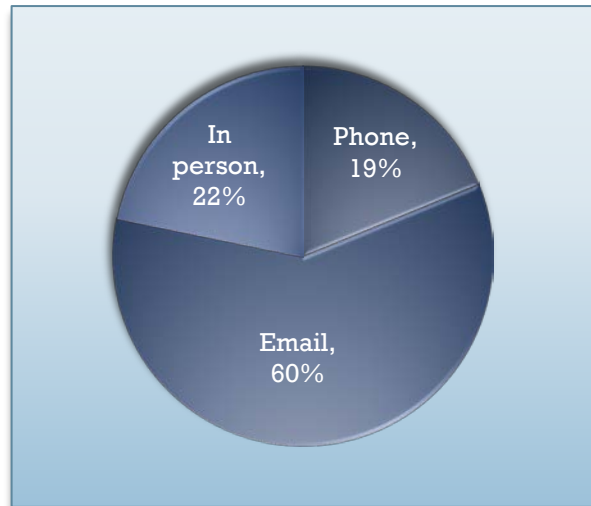
Individual visits include the following:

- ❖ 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 who work 19 hour or less
- ❖ Staff/other are employees in 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 *in person meetings and phone conversations. The office received no individual letters during this recording period.

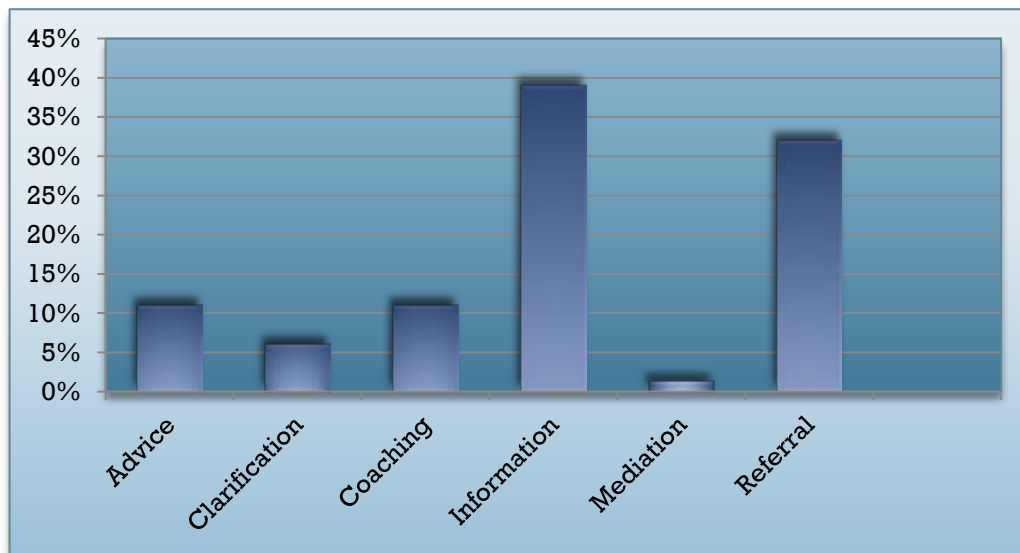
(* In person includes my office, but may include other campus locations including downtown)



Action Taken

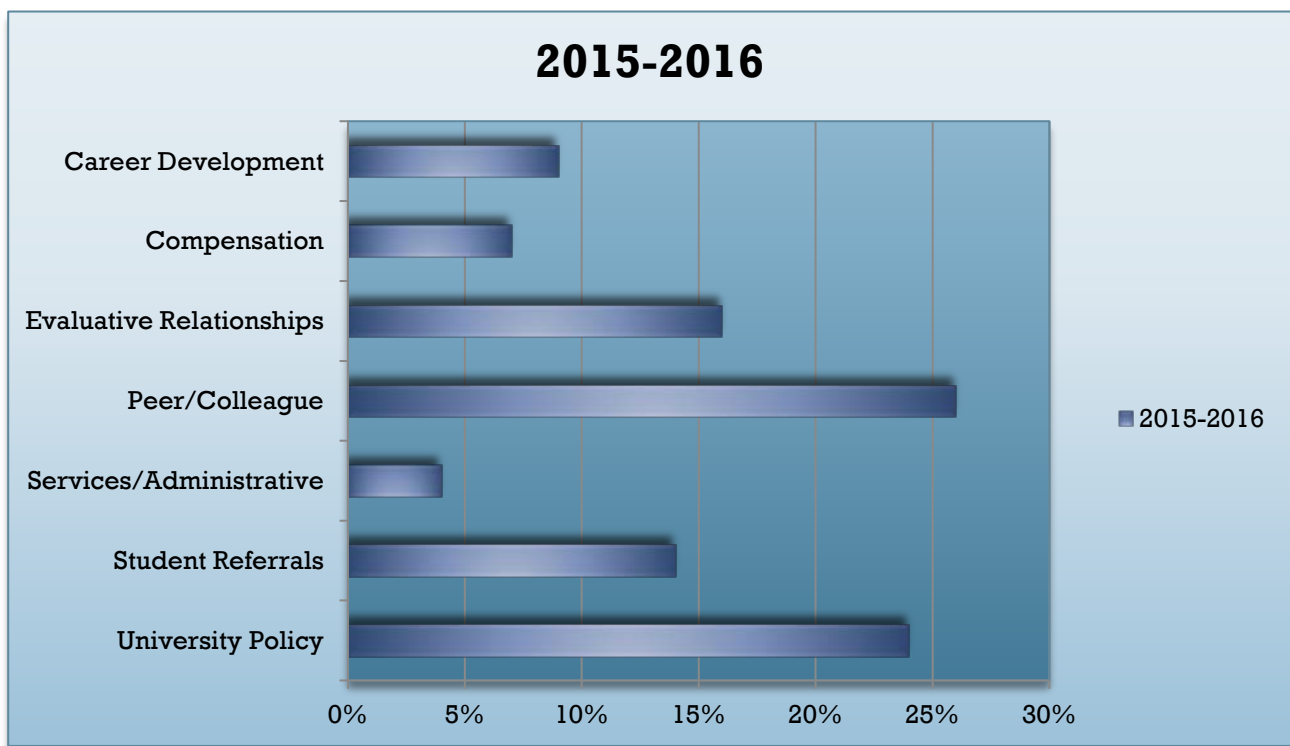
Information, referrals, coaching and advice were actions most often used for individuals seeking assistance through the AA Ombudsperson office. These actions were followed by coaching. Mediation occurred during the year but constituted only 1% of actions taken. Occasionally, individuals would visit to 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: career development, compensation, evaluative relationships, peer/colleague relationships, services or administrative issues, student referrals, and university policy. Subcategories developed including campus carry, communication, EOS concerns, faculty courses, non-tenure/tenure-track faculty concerns, personnel issues, and customer service. Promotion/tenure, student employee concerns, and salary equity 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.

Campus Carry

- Concerns about communication flow
- Lack of understanding policy
- Feeling concerns were not taken into consideration

Communication

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

Customer Service

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

Equal Opportunity Services (EOS)

- Inquiries about process
- Referrals made

Faculty Courses

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

Non-Tenure/Tenure-Track Faculty

- Concerns about fairness
- Inquiries about processes
- Concerns over inequality

Personnel Issues

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

Promotion/Tenure

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

Salary Equity

- Concerns over inequality
- Allegations of differential treatment
- Inquiries about process

Student Employee Concerns

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

University Policy

- Inquiries about process
- Concerns over lack of clarity
- Staff grievance vs. faculty grievance
- Visa concerns (international faculty & students)
- Short term parking policy
- Accommodations for student employees with disabilities
- Use of leave
- Fitness to practice

Non-student employee related concerns constituted referrals to the Student Ombudsperson, but in some cases, there was a need for collaboration between the offices. Challenges faced by students ranged from lack of clarity with course requirements, grades, and course structure. Medical withdraw, course petitions, overpayment of tuition and concerns with student government were issues brought to this office. Again, referrals to the Student Ombudsperson were appropriate.

Overall

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 some cases and coaching in other cases.

Training/Outreach

This office provides a variety of services including training that addresses customer service or communication styles. Facilitated discussions provided 92 staff within Academic Affairs offices the opportunity to debate challenges concerning customer service. Approximately 200 students 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

Donna Edmondson, M.A.

Academic Affairs Ombudsperson

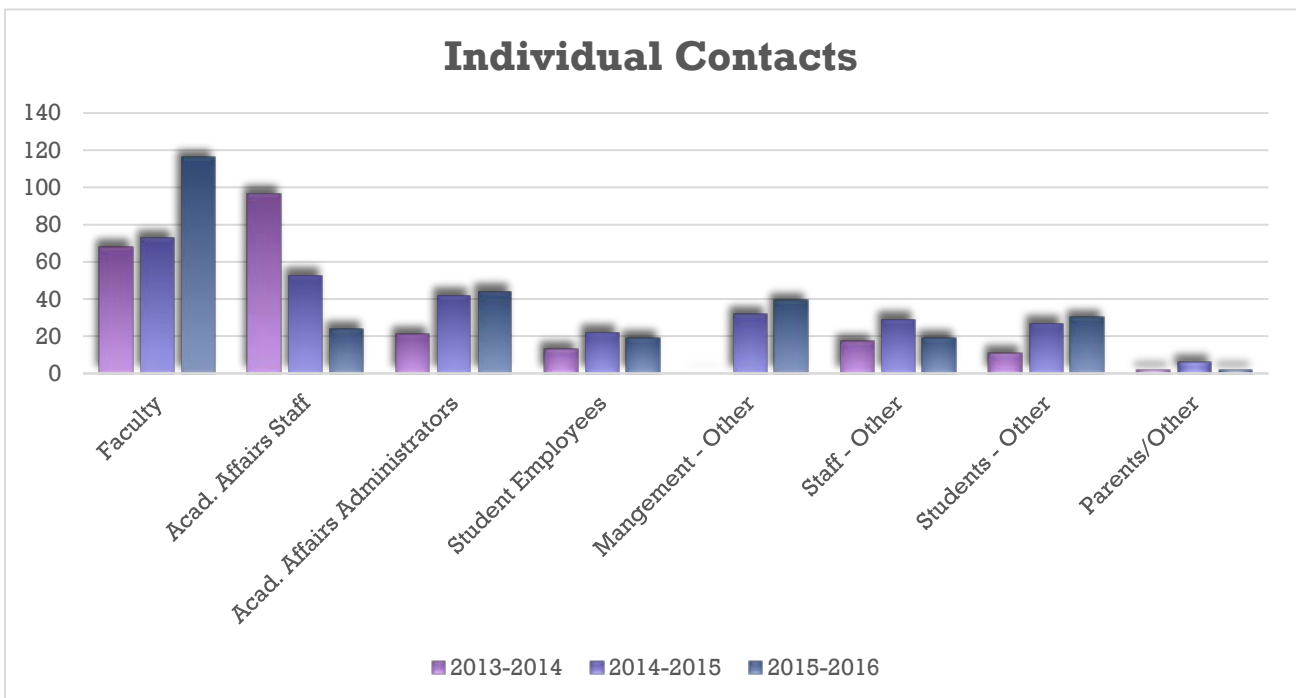
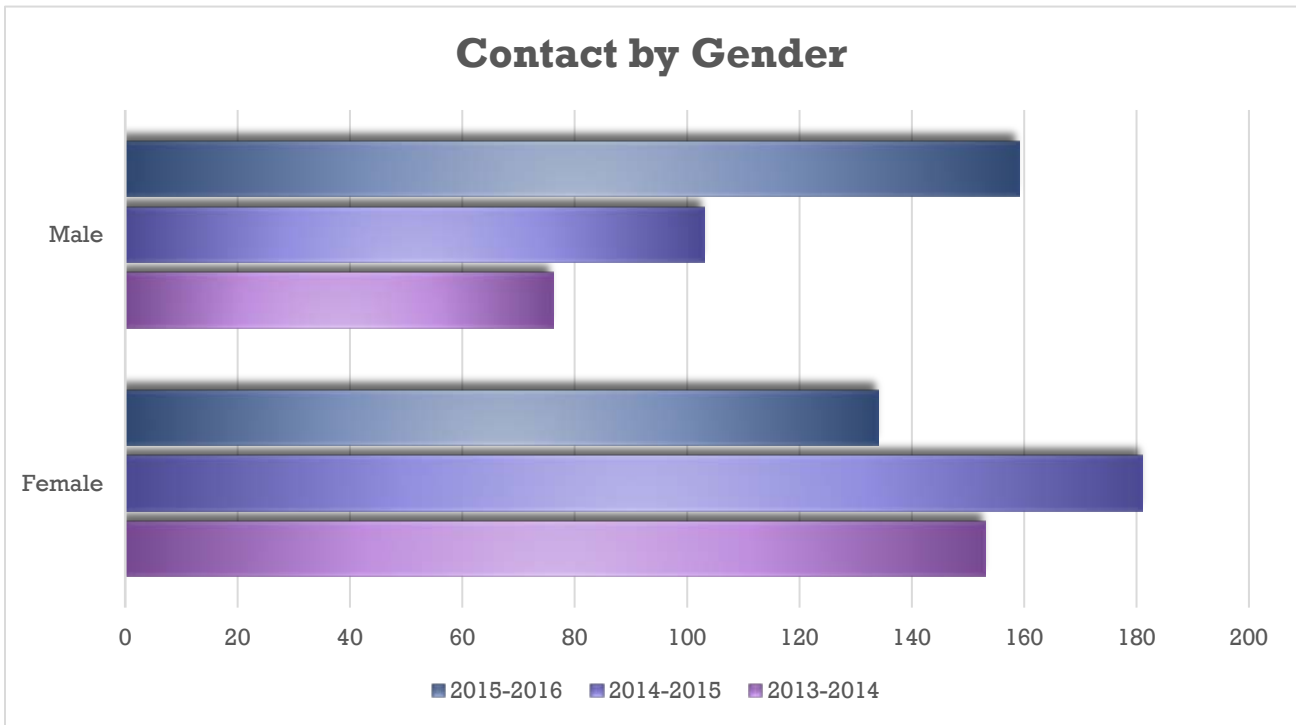
The University of Texas at San Antonio

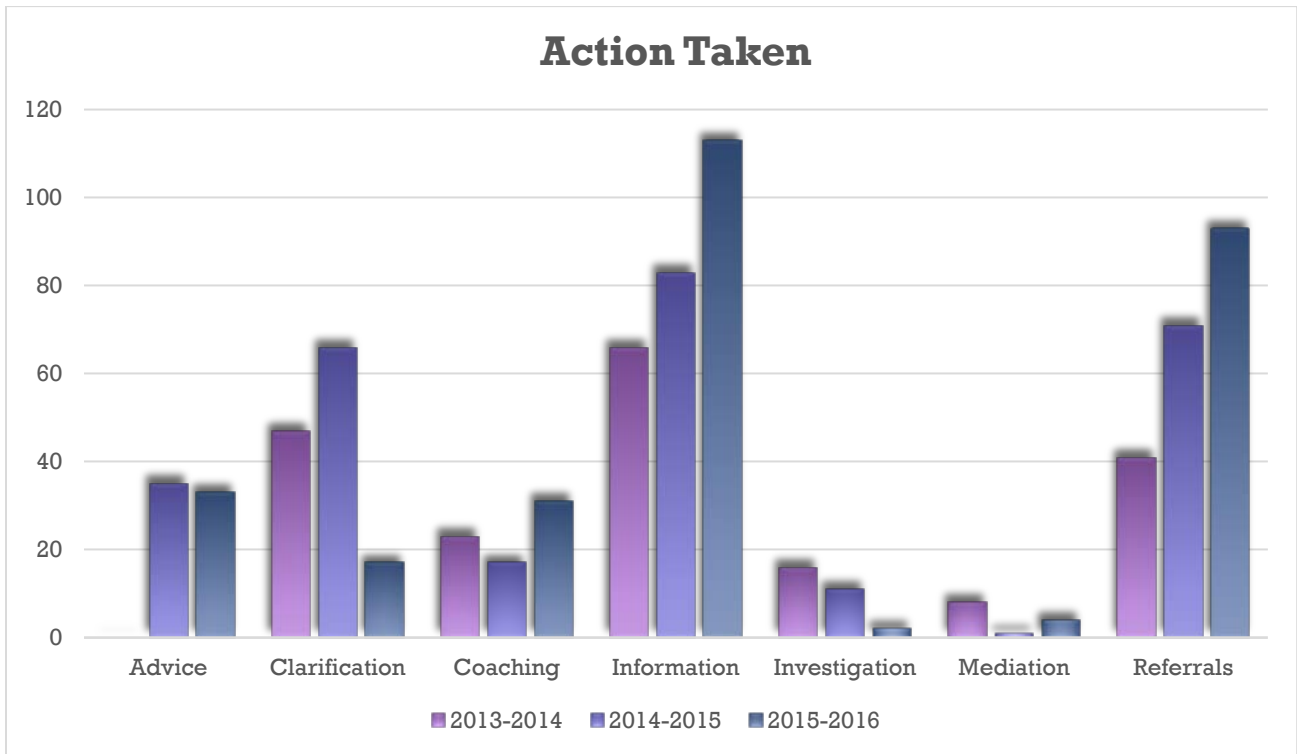
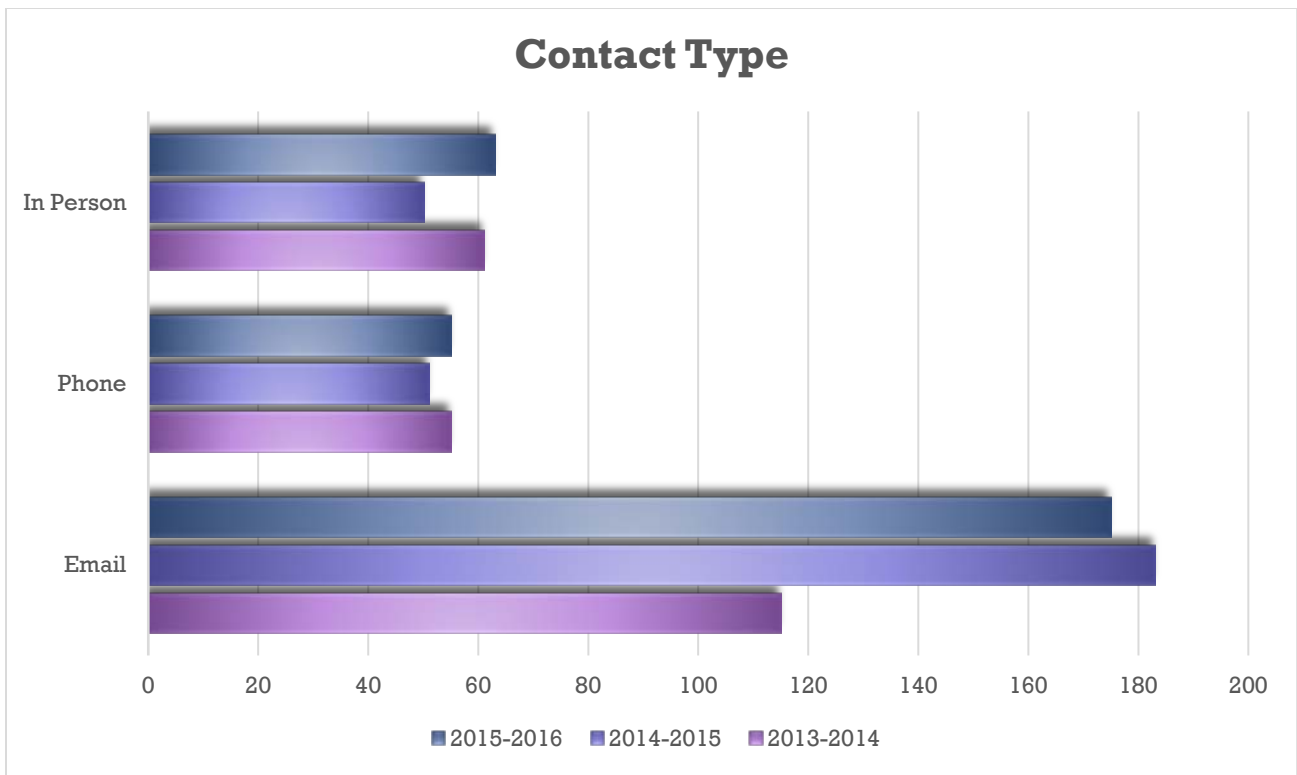
Multidisciplinary Building (MS 2.02.45)

210-458-5605

<http://provost.utsa.edu/vpafs/ombudsperson.asp>

Review of the past three years





Over the past three years, there has been a steady increase in visitors to the Academic Affairs Ombudsperson. Data indicates a need for the services provided. Continued outreach and collaboration will allow this office to grow and provide needed support for UTSA.