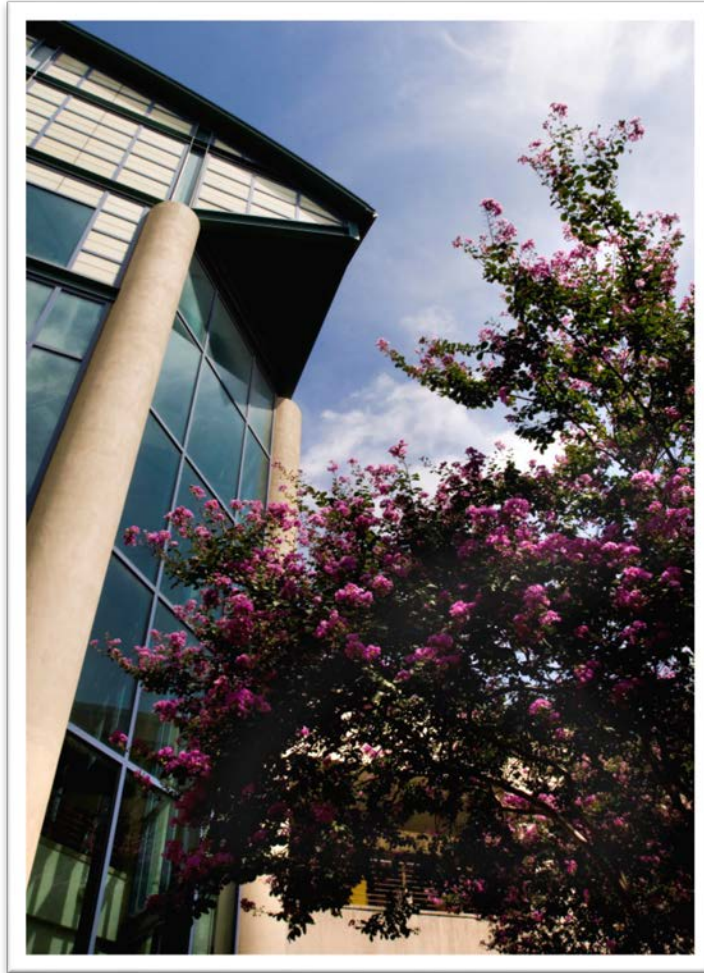


2017-2018

Office of the Senior Vice Provost for Academic  
and Faculty Support

The University of Texas at San Antonio



**[ANNUAL REPORT –  
ACADEMIC AFFAIRS  
OMBUDSPERSON 2017-  
2018]**

## **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 Senior Vice Provost for Academic and Faculty Support 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 is rooted in the Old Norse word *umboðsmaðr*, meaning representative. The modern term finds its origins in the Swedish language and dates back to the 17<sup>th</sup> century and King Charles XII. He established the Office of the Supreme Ombudsman in 1703. 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. The AA Ombudsperson is housed within the Office of the Senior Vice Provost for Academic and Faculty Support. Beginning fall 2018, the AA Ombudsperson will transition into a new role as the University Ombuds. Confidential services will stay the same, but with a wider audience to include all employees of the University of Texas at San Antonio.

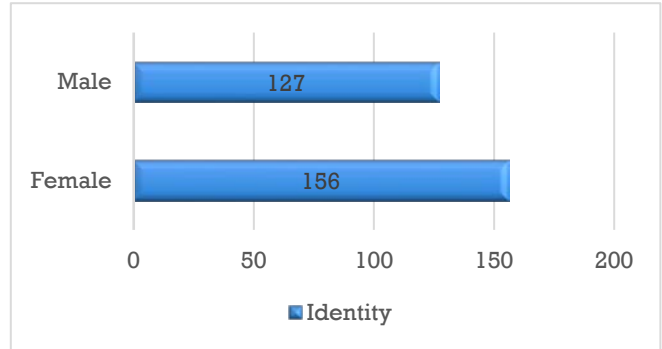
---

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

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

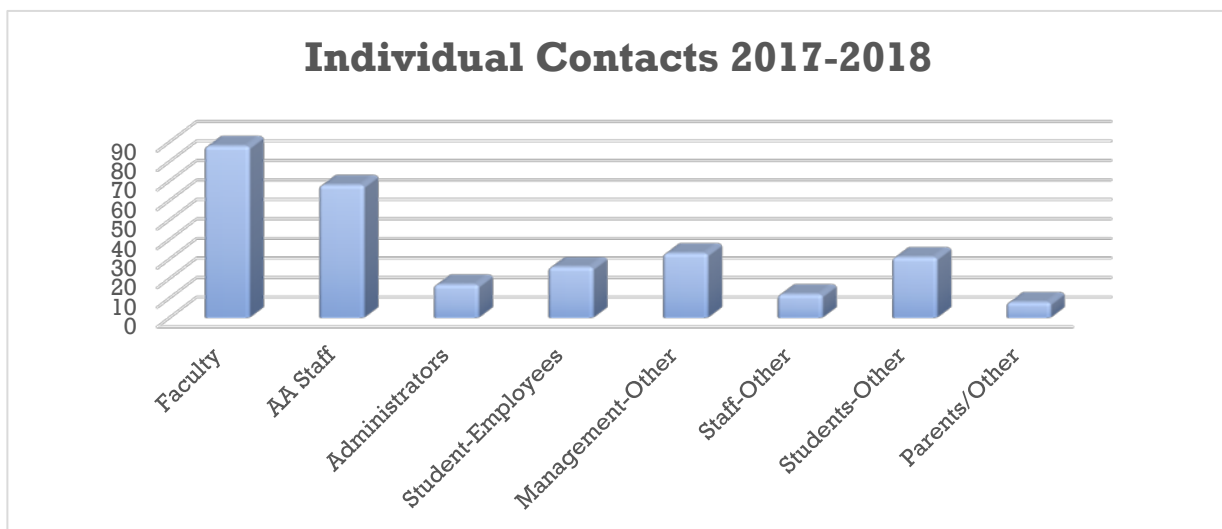
## **Identity**

Visitor interaction fell during the 2017-2018 cycle. One reason for the decrease may be due to different resources available to those served in Academic Affairs, including surveys like the UTSA *Diversity Engagement Survey* that was part of a comprehensive campus climate assessment. Of the visitors served this year, 45% were male. This is a 3% decrease from the previous year.



## **Individual Contacts**

The AA Ombudsperson had 283 contacts between September 2017 and August 2018. Academic Affairs faculty, administrators, staff, and student employees constituted 70% of visits. Students who contacted this office for non-employee related issues were referred to the Student Ombudsperson within Student Affairs.

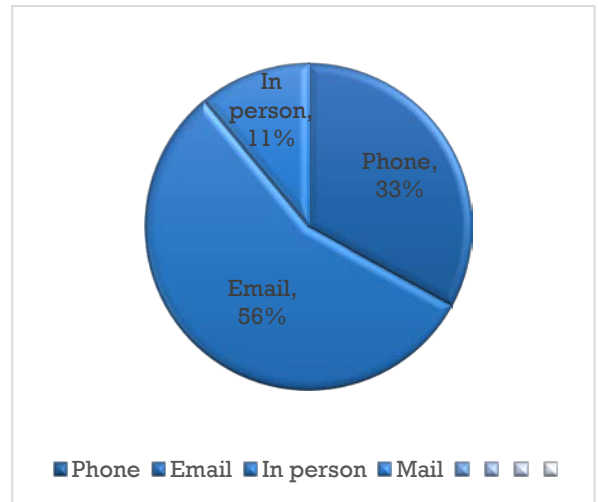


Individual visits include the following:

- ❖ Faculty from various colleges and departments
- ❖ Academic Affairs Staff (non-faculty) within various offices
- ❖ Administrators are Assistant Directors or higher and 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 an outside agent

## **Communication Type**

Communication with visitors consists of email, phone conversations and \*in person meetings. Phone interactions increased, while in person consultations and emails decreased from last year. The decrease in emails may be due to increasing knowledge that emails are not a confidential form of communication and are subject to open records requests. The reduction in face-to-face meetings may be due to scheduling conflicts or logistical challenges, which make phone conversations more appealing. The office received no individual letters during this recording period.

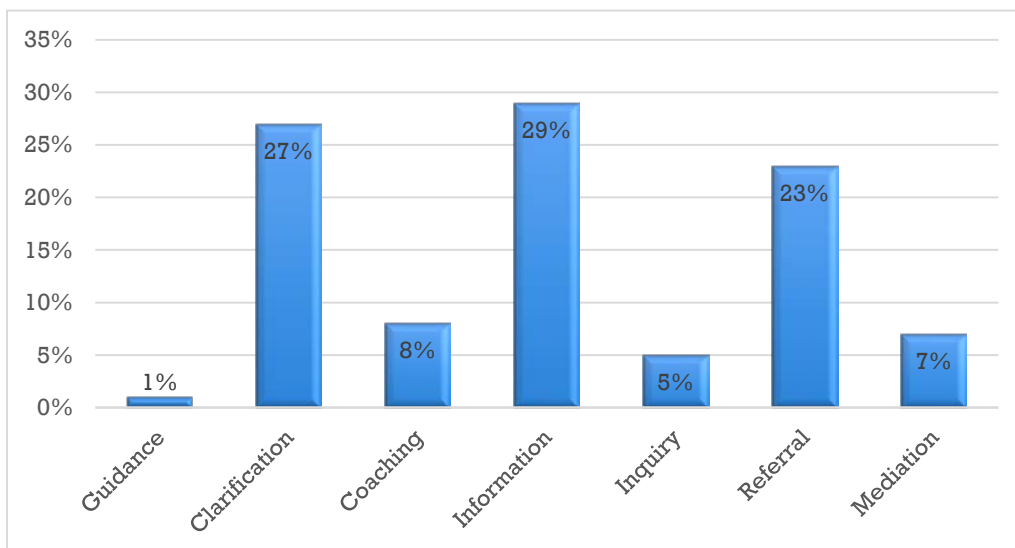


(\* In person includes my office, but may include other campus locations including downtown. Multiple communication types were necessary in some cases.)

## **Assistance Provided**

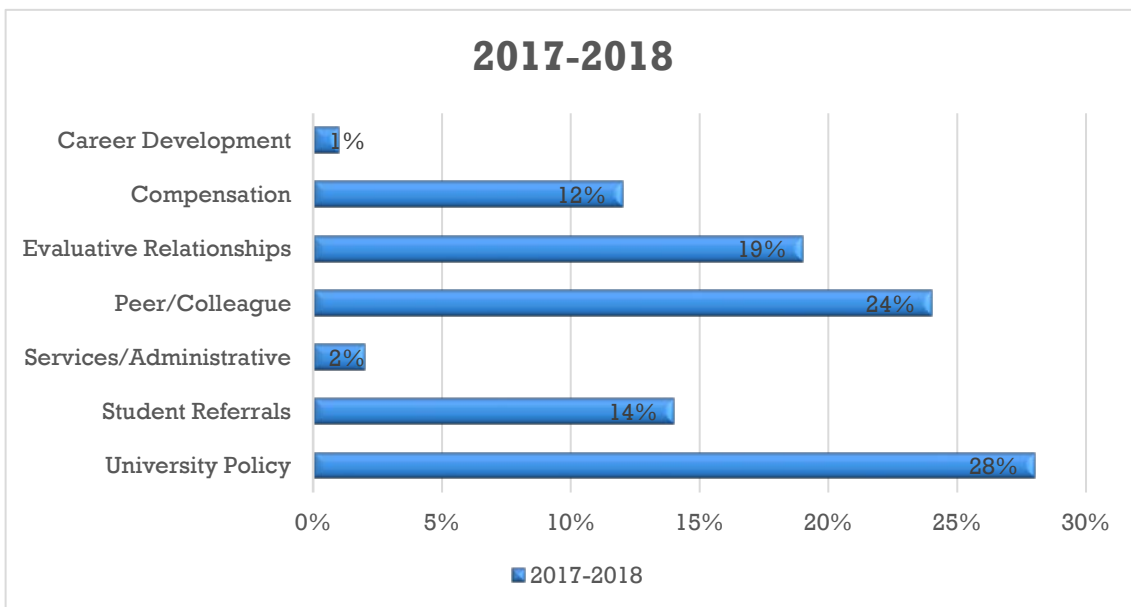
The AA Ombudsperson provided assistance in the areas of information, clarification, and referrals. Assistance also included coaching, inquiries and mediation. Occasionally, individuals would visit to offer suggestions for improvements to University processes or functions and this information was shared with the appropriate offices. As with any assistance, 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 promotion/tenure, faculty development leave, non-tenure/tenure-track faculty concerns, staff evaluations, communication, and personnel issues. Student employee concerns, questions involving EOS and Employee Relations, faculty courses, salary equity and ethics in research were also of concern. Non-student employee questions and situations were often referred to the Student Ombudsperson. In some instances, collaboration between both offices was necessary to resolve issues. Inquiries by non-UTSA community members were directed to the appropriate offices.



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, especially involving the University administration
- Lack of communication between supervisors and staff
- Anxiety about information flow concerning change within the University
- Inquiries concerning the use of social media by employees
- Inquiries concerning the management of challenging subordinates
- Referrals made in some cases

### **Employee Relations (ER)**

- Inquiries or concerns about process
- Concerns about fairness
- Sanctions
- Referrals made

### Equal Opportunity Services (EOS)

- Inquiries or concerns about process
- Title IX
- Evaluations
- Referrals made

### Faculty Courses

- Concerns about fairness
- Inquiries about processes including workload
- Concerns over inequality
- Assertions of retaliation

### Non-Tenure/Tenure-Track Faculty

- Concerns about fairness
- Inquiries about processes including workload
- Concerns about lack of communication within the area
- Concerns over inequality

### Personnel Issues

- Employee/supervisor relationship concerns
- Assertions of retaliation
- Evaluation process
- Concerns over inequality
- Concerns of fairness with the internal hiring process
- Allegations of differential treatment
- Inquiries concerning the management of confrontational subordinates
- Faculty review
- Research ethics
- Grievance process

### Promotion/Tenure

- Concerns about fairness
- Inquiries about process
- Referrals made

### Salary Equity

- Concerns over inequality
- Merit
- Inquiries about process

### Student Employee Concerns

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

### University Policy

- Inquiries about processes and concerns over lack of clarity usually involving the Handbook of Operating Procedures (HOP). Below are a few examples of university policies discussed.
  - Code of ethics
  - Staff grievance
  - Faculty grievance
  - Research ethics/misconduct
  - Conflict of interests
  - Administrative leave
  - Review process
- FMLA policy

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 and course petitions were issues brought to this office. Again, referrals to the Student Ombudsperson were appropriate.

### **Training/Outreach**

This office provides a variety of outreach and training services including customized workshops that address customer service and communication styles. The Academic Affairs Ombudsperson is a certified True Colors facilitator and collaborates with True Color facilitators in Student Affairs to provide workshops for participants across the University community and beyond. Approximately 121 students and student employees participated in True Colors training provided by this office.

The Academic Affairs Ombudsperson and the Student Ombudsperson provided a presentation featuring their roles to approximately 60 faculty and department chairs. This was part of the New Faculty Orientation sponsored by the Office of the Senior Vice Provost for Academic and Faculty Support.

The Academic Affairs Ombudsperson collaborated with the Student Affairs Ombudsperson to host an information table during the summer 2018 Freshmen Orientation Resource Fairs (nine sessions). They also participated in the first Graduate Student Appreciation Week event, the Health and Wellness Fair, sponsored by the Graduate School. The ombuds provided information concerning both positions.

The Academic Affairs Ombudsperson is a core member of the Behavioral Intervention Team (BIT) and participated in several information sessions for faculty and staff. She collaborated with the faculty representative on the BIT to inform and answer questions concerning the function of the team.

The 17-18 academic year was the pilot year and two academic departments and one college accepted our request to visit. During the 18-19 academic year, the BIT will actively seek to meet with more departments, colleges, and non-academic units.

## **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.

## **Feedback from Visitors**

Faculty – *“I just wanted to send a quick message your way to thank you for your advice last week. I did host the meeting and I felt that it was very productive. Of course, the main reason for the productivity was that both parties entered into the meeting in good faith and were willing to speak candidly about their concerns. But I felt that your guidance helped me to structure the meeting and keep it on track.”*

Staff – *“Thank you for taking your time to speak with me yesterday. You gave me information that I hadn’t thought of and I appreciate your insight.”*

Staff – *“Thank you, I felt so much better after we talked. Actually slept well last night, first time in 2 months.”*

Student Employee – *“Thanks for the impartial and objective advice. I already feel better.”*

Staff (Non-Academic Affairs) – *“I wanted to thank you for all the time that you listened & assisted me with all my concerns.”*

## **Overall**

The Academic Affairs Ombudsperson assisted 283 visitors and provided outreach to several areas within the UTSA community. 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 inquiry, and/or discussion was required. The Ombudsperson made referrals in some instances and coaching in other cases.

As the AA Ombudsperson role transitions into the University Ombuds in the 18-19 academic year, outreach to areas in all divisions will be necessary. Informing the UTSA community on the advantages of interacting with the Ombuds to resolve concerns in an informal setting will be part of a communication campaign.

*Donna Edmondson, M.A.*

*University Ombuds*

*The University of Texas at San Antonio*

*NPB 5.130*

<http://www.utsa.edu/ombudsperson/index.html>