

2016-2017

Office of the Senior Vice Provost for Academic
and Faculty Support

The University of Texas at San Antonio



[ANNUAL REPORT – ACADEMIC AFFAIRS OMBUDSPERSON 2016- 2017]

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 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, 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.

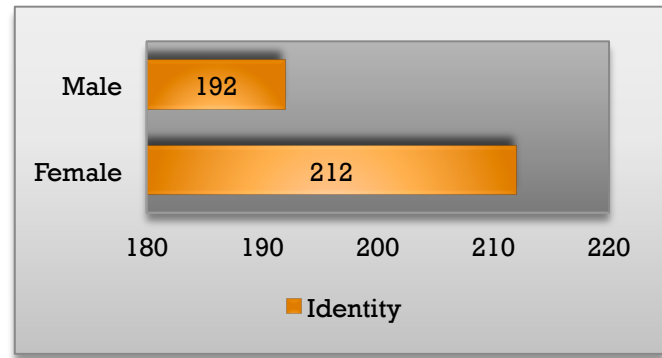
The AA Ombudsperson offers confidential services to all faculty, staff, and student employees in a safe and welcoming environment. Exceptions to this confidentiality are made with the permission of the visitor, or if it is a violation of University policy or the law, or if there is a perceived imminent 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. The AA Ombudsperson is housed within the Office of 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>.

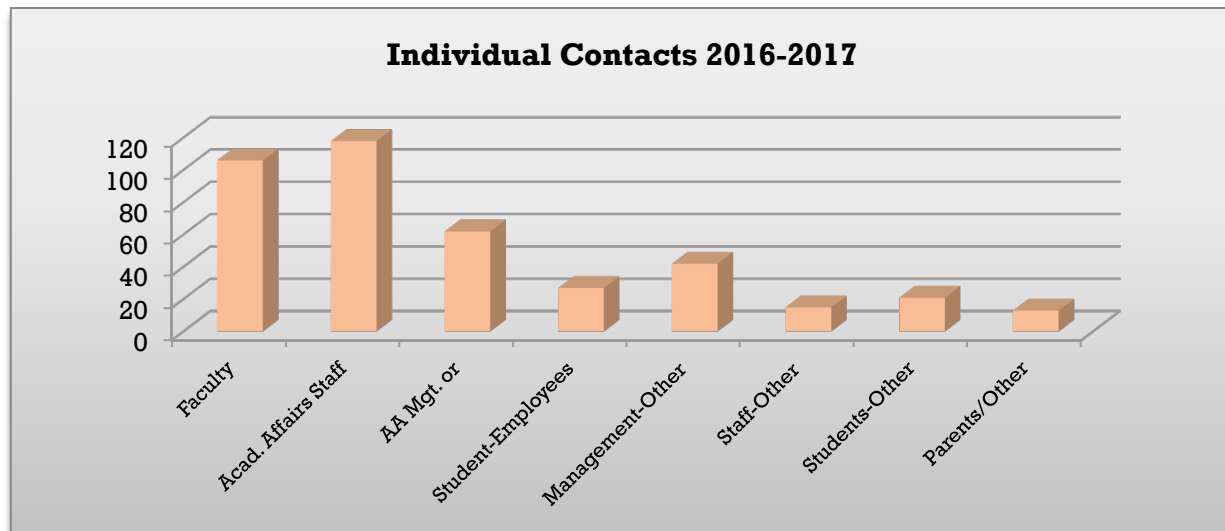
Identity

Interactions increased during the 2016-2017 cycle. One reason for the overall increase in visitors may be due to changes the University has gone through during this academic year. Of the visitors served this year, 48% were male. This is a 7% decrease from the previous year.



Individual Contacts

The AA Ombudsperson had 404 interactions between September 2016 and August 2017. 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 Ombudsperson within Student Affairs.



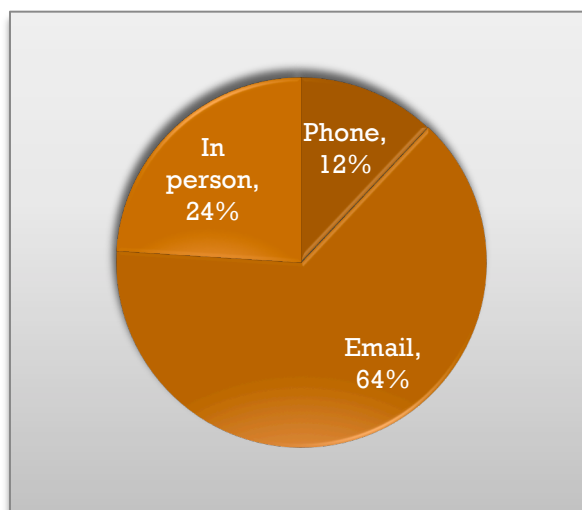
Individual visits include the following:

- ❖ 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

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.

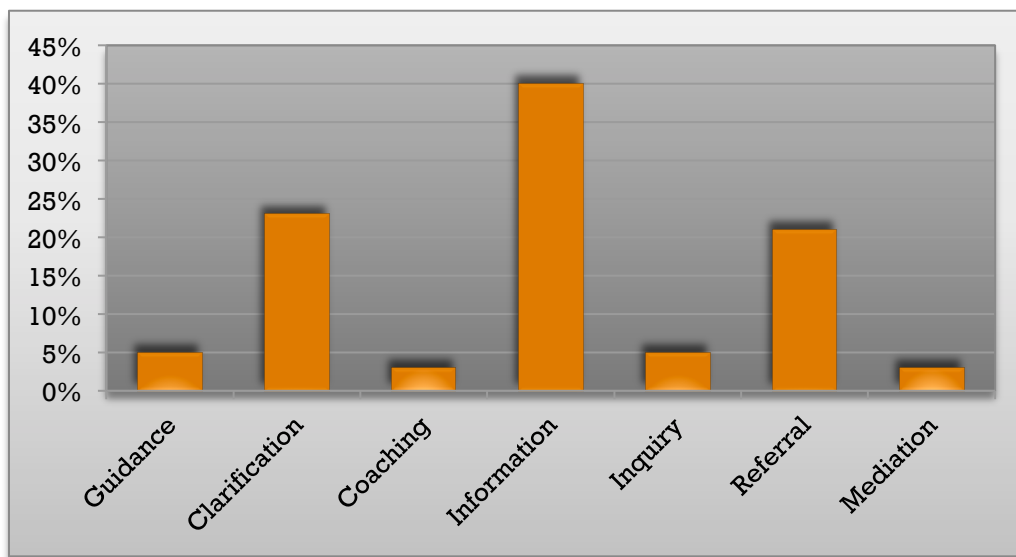
(* In person includes the AA Ombudsperson's office at the Main Campus, but may include other locations including the Downtown Campus)



Action Taken

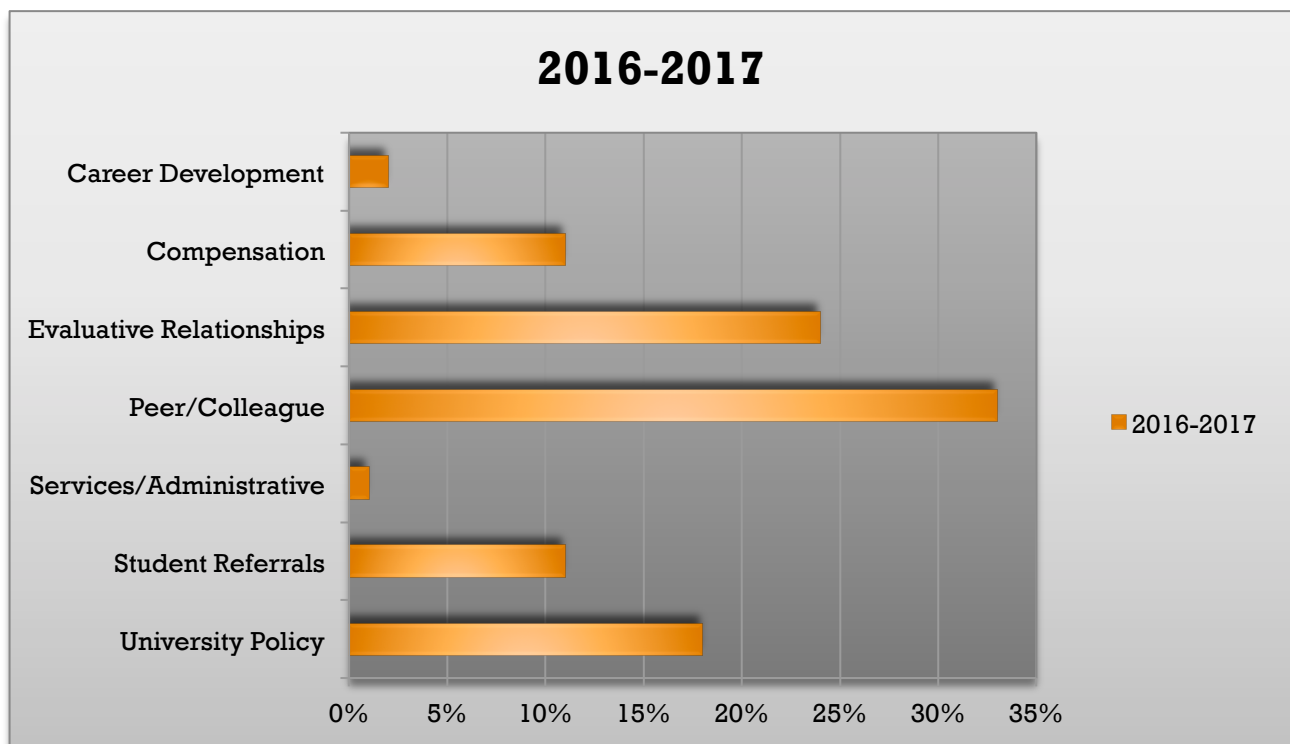
Information, referrals, and clarification were actions most often used for individuals seeking assistance through the AA Ombudsperson office. Guidance, coaching and mediation occurred during the year which constituted 11% of actions taken. Occasionally, individuals would visit to offer suggestions for improvements to University processes or functions and this information was shared with the appropriate offices. Identities were kept confidential. Inquiries were 5% of actions taken.

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
- Inquiries about confidentiality and neutrality
- Anxiety about information flow concerning change within the University
- Inquiries concerning the use of social media by employees including student employees
- Inquiries concerning the management of confrontational subordinates
- Referrals made in some cases

Employee Relations (ER)

- Inquiries about process
- Evaluations
- Sanctions
- Referrals made

Equal Opportunity Services (EOS)

- Inquiries 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 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
- Inquiries concerning the use of social media by employees including student employees

Promotion/Tenure

- Concerns about fairness
- Inquiries about process
- Referrals made

Salary Equity

- Concerns over inequality
- Allegations of differential treatment
- 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 teaching at UTSA
 - Staff grievance
 - Faculty grievance
 - Research ethics/misconduct
 - Conflict of interests
 - Administrative leave
 - Review process
 - Consensual relationships
- DACA and other immigration concerns
- ADA policy
- 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, 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 inquiry, 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 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 457 students and student employees, 15 staff and 50 non-UTSA community members participated in True Colors training provided by this office.

The Academic Affairs Ombudsperson collaborates with the Student Affairs Ombudsperson during Undergraduate Orientation and Graduate School Orientation to provide information concerning both positions. During the 2016-2017 academic year approximately 500+ incoming undergraduate and graduate students were introduced to the ombudspersons.

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 – *“Thank you Donna. Also let me say that I am very glad you are here at the university serving in the role that you do.”*

Staff – *“I started work, and so far, so good. Finally, I would like to thank you for taking the time to listen to my concerns and guiding me to do the right thing. I duly appreciate it.”*

Student Employee – *“Thank you, very much, for these resources. I’m so glad you had time to talk to me. Thanks again.”*

Contact Information

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