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**No problem is too big or too small. Let's talk!**

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# IOWA | Office of the Ombudsperson

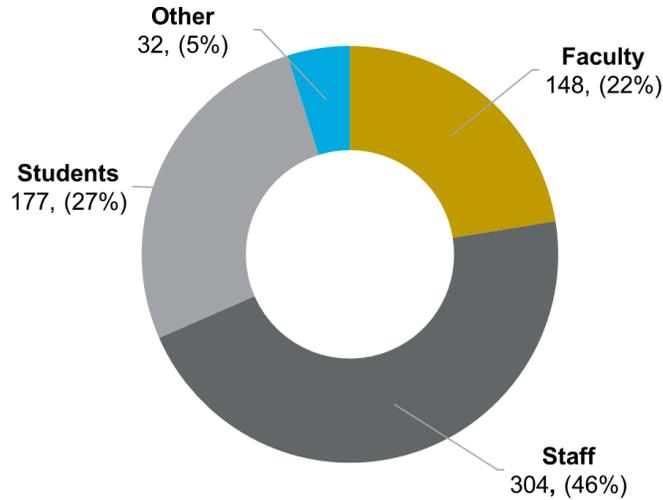
## ANNUAL REPORT 2021-2022

The Ombuds Office serves the UI community by providing **confidential, impartial, informal, and independent** problem solving and conflict resolution. This year **661** visitors were assisted.

UI staff were again the largest group served at 46%.

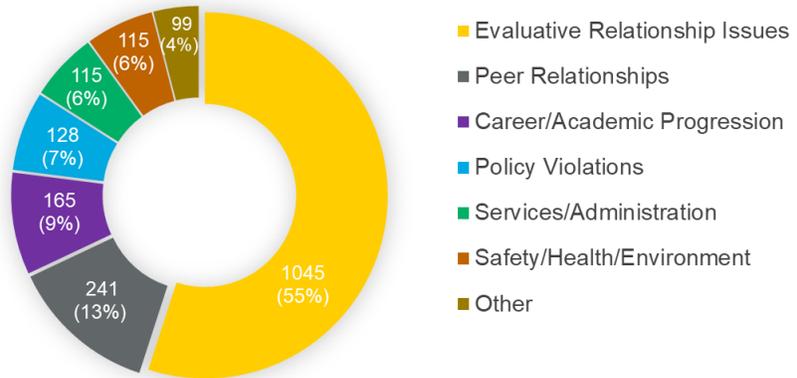
Professional & Scientific Staff accounted for 40% of the 661 visitors assisted this fiscal year.

### TYPES OF VISITORS



**Number of Consultations from Department Administrators and Human Resources Staff: 64**

### VISITOR CONCERNS



Nearly one in three (32%) visitors indicated **disrespectful behavior** as a concern. This is an 8% increase from 24% in 2020-2021.

### BREAKDOWN OF CASES WITH A PERCEIVED RISK TO CAMPUS:

Loss of Productivity.....	36%	Litigation.....	4%
Turnover.....	18%	Negative Publicity.....	3%
Policy Violations.....	14%	Safety.....	2%
Grievance.....	11%		

*\*Cases may have multiple perceived risks or none at all*



## HIGHLIGHTS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The following issues were of primary concern to our office : 1. Bullying concerns involving residents, fellows, post-docs, graduate students, international scholars, and grant-funded staff. 2. Advisor-advisee relationships involving graduate students and their academic mentors. 3. Interpersonal conflict in the health sciences and health care areas.

In 2021-22, the University of Iowa's administration sought to return the campus to normal operations as we continued to act in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. We hypothesize that the increase in interpersonal contact in the workplace correlates with the elevated number of visitors who raised concerns about disrespectful behavior this past year with the Office of the Ombudsperson. Almost a third of our visitors (32%) shared that disrespectful behavior was a concern, particularly in situations where one party had supervisory authority over another, resulting in an 8% increase in comparison to the previous fiscal year. Navigating workplace dynamics in the virtual environment for a significant period has increased the probability of new frictions as people returned to the workplace. This has contributed to an increase in stress levels as the pandemic remains a constant factor.

**Bullying:** The Office of the Ombudsperson received multiple requests for assistance from residents, fellows, postdoctoral scholars, graduate students, international scholars, and grant-funded staff to help address the perceived bullying behavior initiated by supervising faculty members, physicians, and/or principal investigators in research labs. Their situations are of particular concern because residents, fellows, postdocs, and some staff members are among the most vulnerable people on campus. Vulnerability exists because many in this highlighted subset of the campus community are without access to institutional organizations established to aid in providing protective measures. In addition, several of the visitors from these groups have been women and/or people of color expressing feelings of being isolated and marginalized, impeding their perceived ability to voice their concerns safely in the workplace.

Postdoctoral scholars, fellows, and residents may be in precarious positions because of the contingent or temporary nature of their funding and, in some cases, due to a lack of representation by a union or similar organization with institutional standing. Graduate students are represented by COGS, Graduate Student Senate, and Graduate and Professional Student Government. However, these governing bodies have little power to address issues of bullying initiated by supervisors, especially when those supervisors are tenured faculty members supporting the students through grants. International scholars have an additional layer of vulnerability when they are on temporary visas, as their programs of study or research are based upon their continued appointments. Any termination of appointment could result in being legally required to leave the country immediately.

## HIGHLIGHTS AND RECOMMENDATIONS CONT'D

**Recommendations:** Most federal funding agencies, such as the NIH and NSF, have guidelines to discourage hostile work environments. However, if faculty members or researchers are not in compliance with these guidelines, then the university could lose grant funding from these agencies. Thus, it is important for our university to address these work environments with nuance and care. We suggest proactive coaching of PIs and faculty members to serve as a reminder that student success is part of our strategic plan as well as to draw their attention to the funding agencies' hostile work environment guidelines and sanctions. The Office of the Ombudsperson can serve as an impartial resource to help facilitate these discussions, mediate conflicts, and offer interactive presentations on the importance of respectful workplaces.

**Advisor-advisee relationships:** Graduate students have voiced concerns with the Office of the Ombudsperson regarding the fear of losing the support of a mentor, both financially and professionally. The academic power wielded by advisors puts them at a disadvantage should they choose to speak up.

**Recommendations:** We encourage departmental Directors of Graduate Study to stay in communication with graduate students and ensure their wellbeing. The Office of the Ombudsperson is always available to facilitate discussions or mediate conflict if needed.

**Interpersonal Conflict:** The Office of the Ombudsperson has heard numerous visitor concerns in connection with the health sciences and health care at the University of Iowa. As we continue to navigate the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, we must recognize the additional stressors and enormous burden this has continued to place on healthcare workers, including faculty and staff who are engaged in patient care. The resulting pressure is likely surfacing in ways that have contributed to interpersonal tensions and conflicts. The risks to the university include a lack of productivity due to conflict or anxiety, loss of personnel, loss of federal funding, or the possibility of serious policy violations, leading to grievances or even legal action.

**Recommendations:** It is critical to focus on proactive measures on the part of administrators to ensure that faculty and staff have the emotional and psychological support necessary to be productive and contented in their work, as well as to be effective and helpful mentors to people they supervise. Mental health services should continue to be promoted as a resource on campus and made accessible to meet the demands of the campus community.

The Office of Ombudsperson will continue to assess the needs of the campus based on the concerns we hear, while also serving as the informal, impartial, independent, and confidential resource to propose options of improvement for members of the campus community.