OFFICE OF THE UNIVERSITY OMBUDS

ANNUAL REPORT

JULY 1, 2023–JUNE 30, 2024

For the Syracuse University Community

Syracuse University

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INTRODUCTION, HISTORY AND PHILOSOPHY

This serves as the 2023-24 annual report from Syracuse University Ombuds Neal Powless G'08. The report includes data from July 2023 through June 2024 in alignment with the University's fiscal year which covers the summer, fall and spring semesters.

THE OFFICE OF THE UNIVERSITY OMBUDS was established in February 2018 at the recommendation of the University Senate Committee on Women's Concerns and the Chancellor's Workgroup on Diversity and Inclusion. Professor Emeritus Samuel Clemence was named to head the office in an interim capacity and a search committee was formed to identify a permanent ombuds. Neal Powless assumed leadership of the office in January 2019 after being part of the University in a variety of roles since 2004. The office serves all graduate students, faculty and staff of Syracuse University. The office is currently located in the lower level of 111 Waverly Ave., which is home to a few universally used offices that also serve the same constituents. In 2023-24 the office consisted of the ombuds, two rotating graduate student ombuds interns and the office assistant who manages all scheduling and public inquiries as well as triages issues for the office.

THE PRIMARY PHILOSOPHY of the Office of the University Ombuds remains to support and empower individuals to manage their conflicts in an environment that is confidential, informal, independent and neutral. Visitors experience a confidential conversation that allows the opportunity to explore options to resolve the conflicts they are experiencing. Each visitor is given the option to share what they feel is needed about their experience. They receive a plethora of options, without judgement, which empowers them to act on an option that fit best for them. This experience for many has been cathartic and has allowed visitors to be open to engage in behaviors and conversations that have led to some form of a resolution.

> *Thank you so very much for your captivating activity and presentation on Tuesday. I think the students truly enjoyed it and had some valuable takeaways. Your team has been so helpful throughout.*
>
> REFLECTION FROM PRESENTATION

ACCOMPLISHMENTS

This year the Office of the University Ombuds managed a full load of cases and presentations of services as well as trainings for the entire University. The office made notable progress in the following areas:

- The office annual impact has reached the highest number of people since the office began operation in 2018.
- The ombuds was a featured presenter at the International Ombuds Association annual conference in 2024.
- The office employed two graduate students at separate times during the 2023-24 academic year.
- The office conducted a 90-minute large group training presentation for over 75 people.
- The ombuds presented at the DEIA Symposium on graduate student trends and issues that have come through the office.

> *Thank you for a great meeting. It was one of the best meetings I have ever had at Syracuse University.*
>
> ANONYMOUS VISITOR

OBSERVED TRENDS

1. Lack of acknowledgement and responsiveness by peers, faculty, leadership/supervisors.
2. Individuals in leadership roles engaging in targeting, exploitation and inappropriate behavior toward those they supervise and have authority over.
3. Individuals engaging in unethical behavior as well as comments of bias and microaggressions.
4. Leaders engaging in behavior that fosters a fear of retaliation and toxic environment that impacts moral.
5. Poor peer relationships that have escalated conflict and impact the individuals as well as the work environment.
6. Lack of support and training around policies, work functions, work expectations and structures within their areas of the University

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> *First, I hope that you are doing well and that you have had a restful break. I wanted to reach out and thank you for your support as I concluded my time at Syracuse University. Words are not an adequate medium of gratitude for helping me through that very difficult time.*
>
> ANONYMOUS VISITOR

REFLECTION FROM THE OMBUDS

Winston Churchill has been quoted saying "success consists of going from failure to failure without loss of enthusiasm." Thus, success is a product of the lessons we learn from our failures. Dr. Joe Dispenza believes we learn from either failure or massive desire for change. Success can be a byproduct of failure. So, why do we as humans demand perfection of ourselves and others without space for failure?

I have learned that thoughtfulness can become a tool to support conflict resolution. Thoughtfulness can be defined as the action or habit of anticipating and being attentive to others; being careful, reflective, contemplative and mindful. This may seem like a counterintuitive response to failure, but it may also be a type of response that has the potential to support success for yourself and for others. When you make a mistake, how do you want people to respond to you? Do you hope that they are thoughtful and patient with you? What did you receive when you made a mistake, if it was not thoughtfulness?

I acknowledge that I make mistakes and chose what lessons to learn from them. I also understand how easy it is to get caught up in our daily thoughts and investments in our goals and achievements. This focus on the outcome does not always allow the time or space to see things from other perspectives or experiences. In this state of mind our behavior can sometimes be interpreted as harsh, aggressive, insensitive, or even abusive by others. These behaviors do not always yield the positive results we expect.

In a recent group facilitation training, I was introduced to a prompt that reminded me of this topic. The prompt was, "What lesson do you bring with you from the pandemic into 2024?" Surely, we all have our own answer to this question, and it is those answers that inform each of our actions. Within my work in 2023-24 as the ombuds, I was reminded that the lesson I bring with myself into today is thoughtfulness.

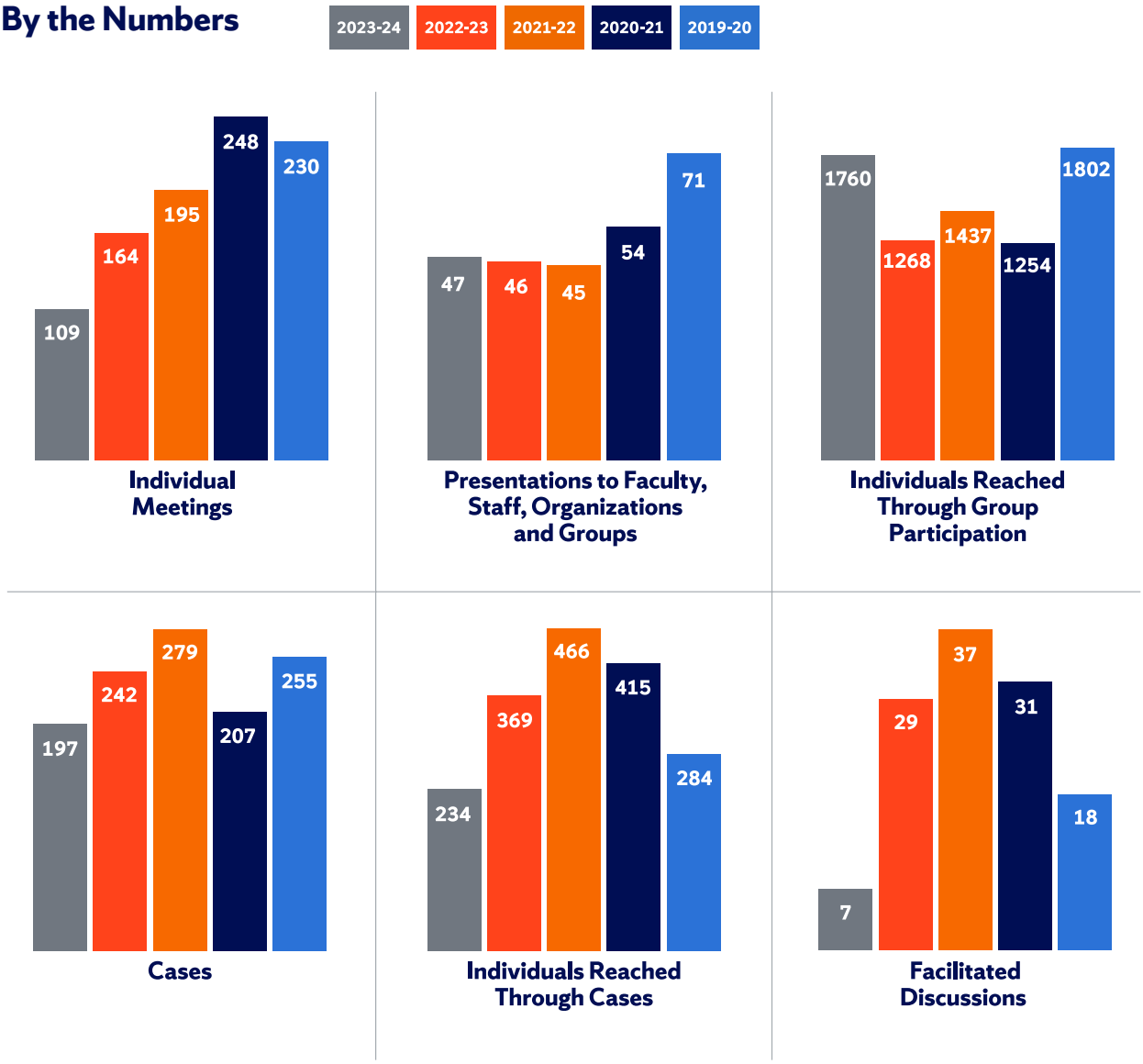
As the University ombuds, and reflecting on the information in this report, I have a question for each of you: Where and when can you be more thoughtful as an individual within your academic institution? The trends within this report can shed light on how you as an individual, group, team, department or as an institution, can engage in thoughtfulness. I would like to thank all those who used the Office of the University Ombuds. This report would not be possible without your bravery and willingness to engage in resolving conflicts you have experienced.

> *"Thank you for joining us for our retreat day! I appreciate you taking the time to meet with us (and so early in the morning). Your presentation was insightful and engaging! It was a wonderful way for our team to reflect and prepare for the start of the academic year. Thank you!"*
>
> REFLECTION FROM PRESENTATION

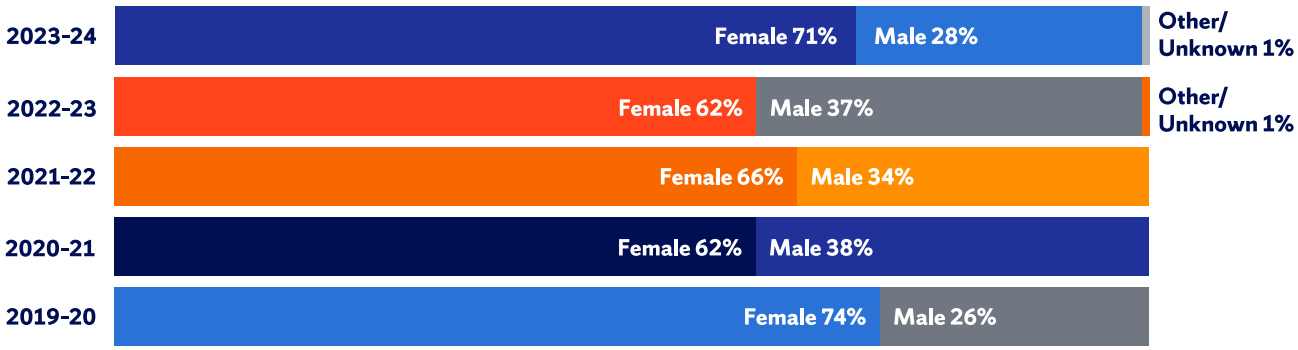
DATA FOR VISITORS AND OFFICE STATISTICS

Comparison by Fiscal Year

By the Numbers

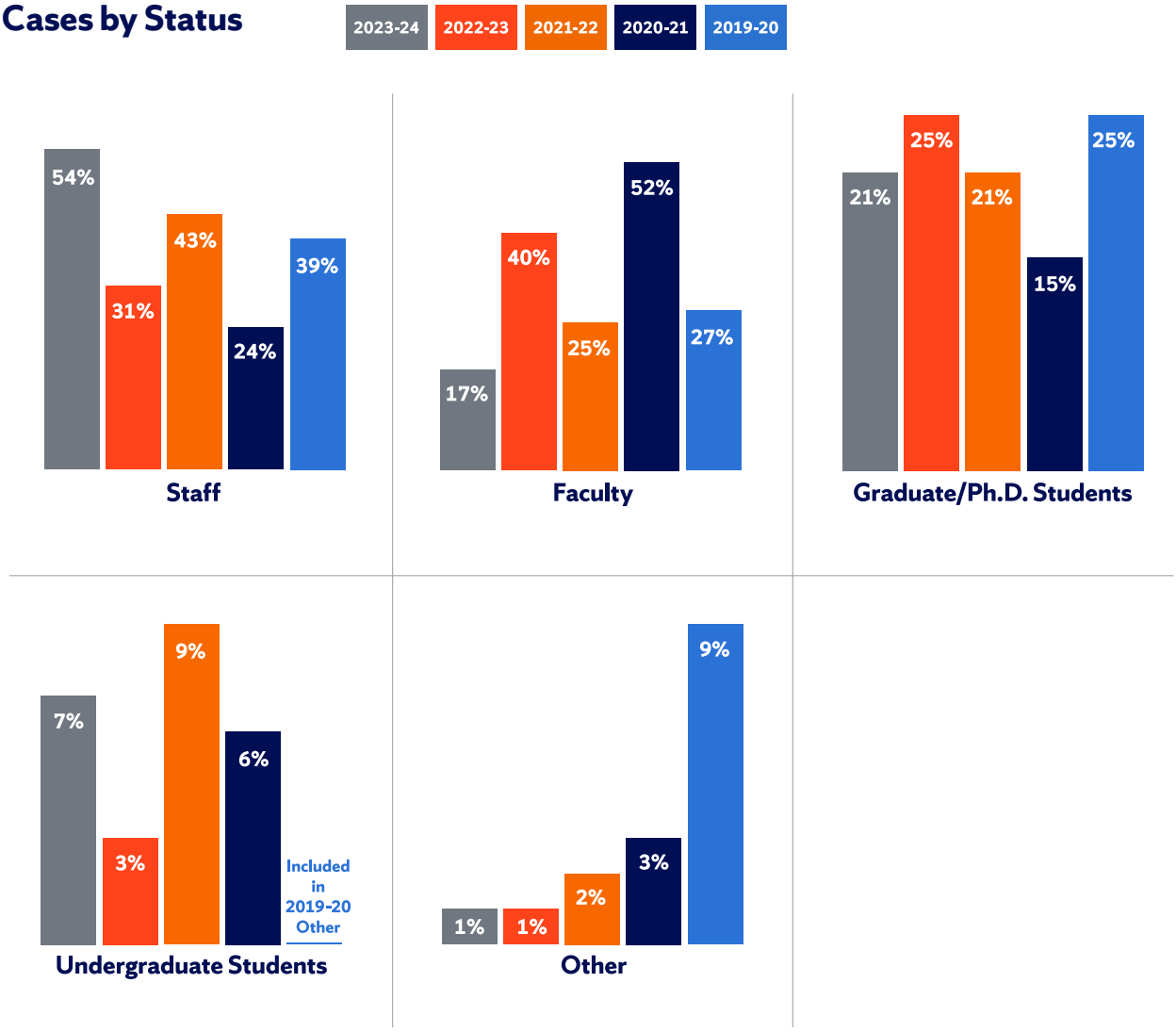


Cases by Demographics



DATA FOR VISITORS AND OFFICE STATISTICS
(continued)

Cases by Status



DATA FOR VISITORS AND OFFICE STATISTICS
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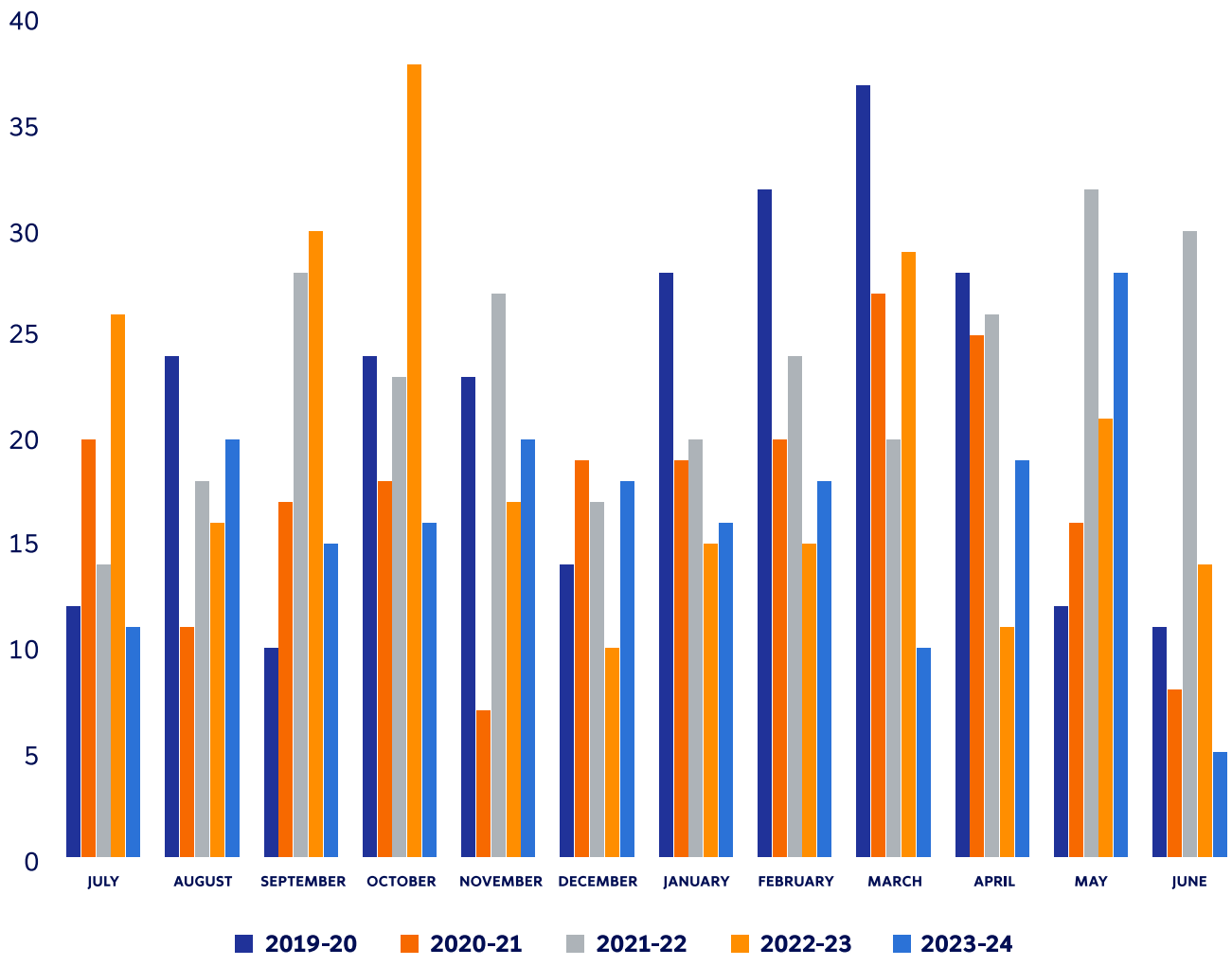
Fiscal Year Comparison of Case Loads



DATA FOR VISITORS AND OFFICE STATISTICS
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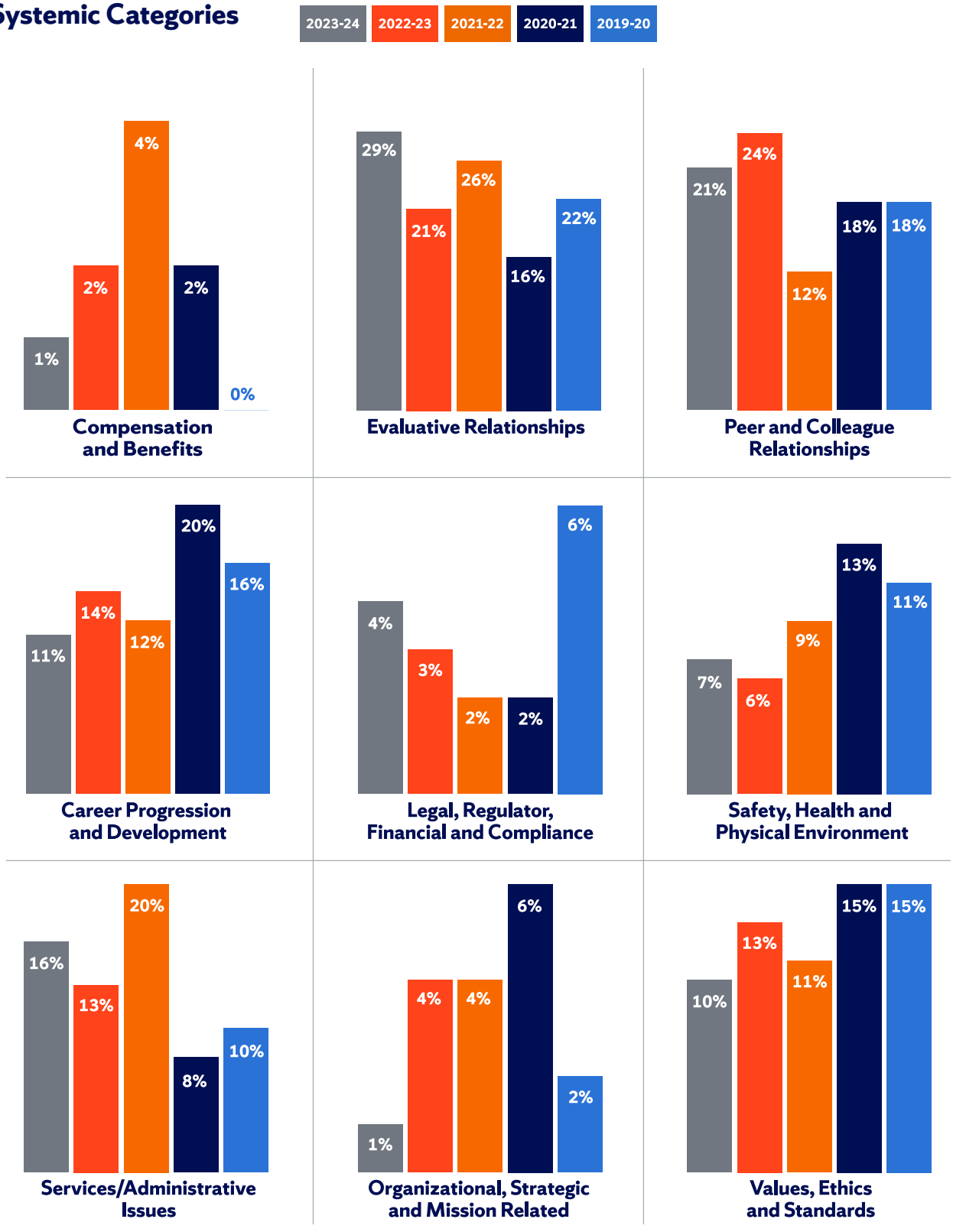
Systemic Categories



DATA FOR VISITORS AND OFFICE STATISTICS
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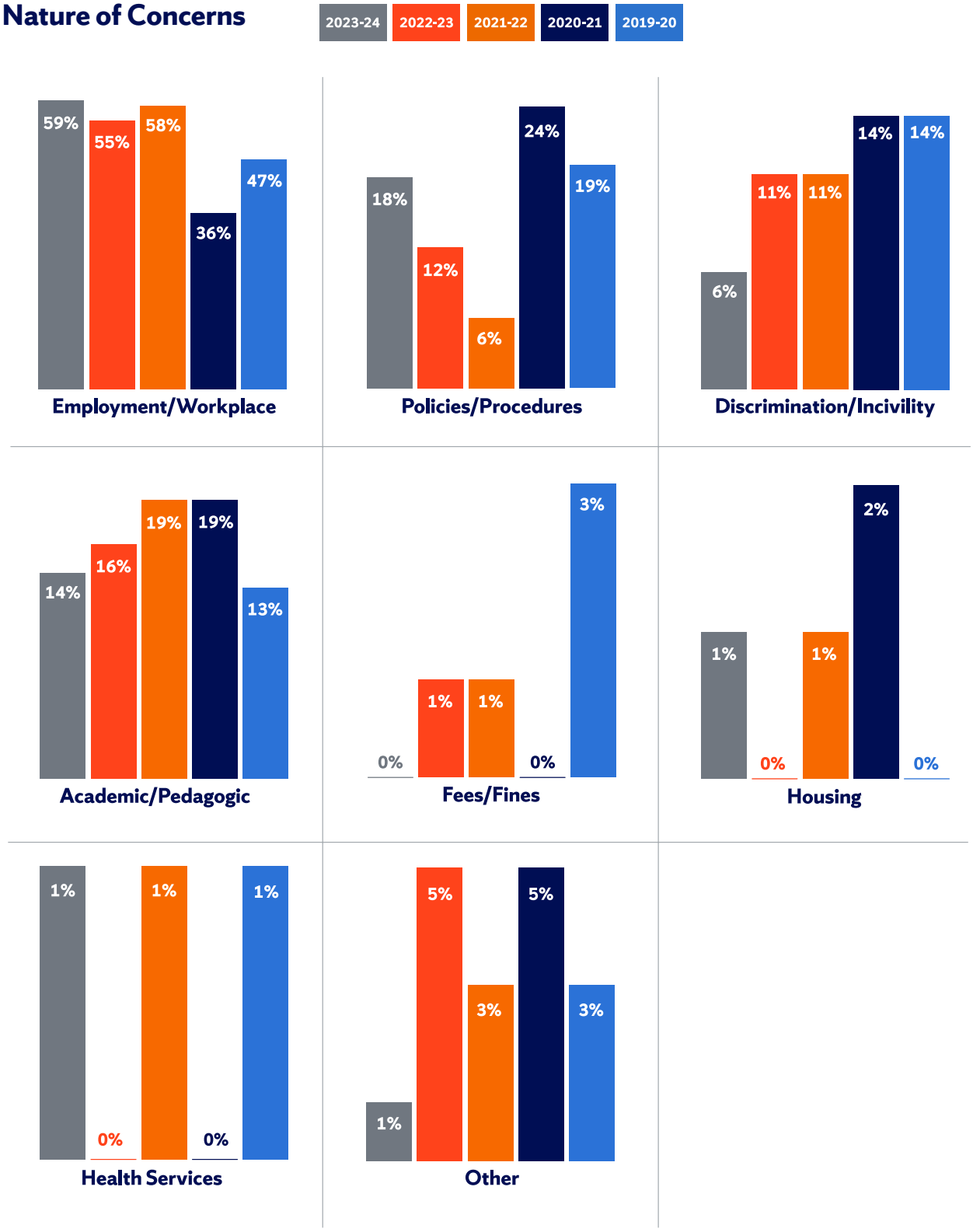
Nature of Concerns



DATA FOR VISITORS AND OFFICE STATISTICS
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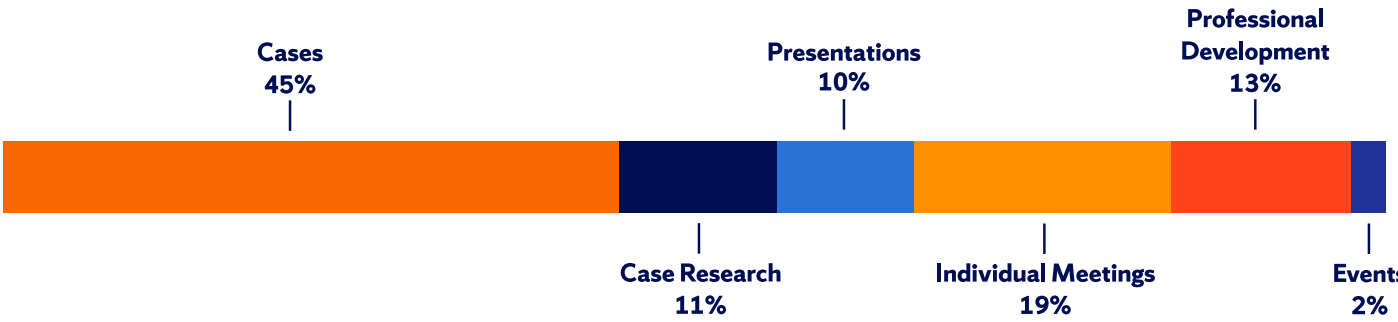
Annual Review for the Ombuds Office



APPENDIX

Five Common Questions About the Office of the University Ombuds

1. What is an ombuds?

Taken from the Swedish word *ombudsman*, which roughly translates to "representative," the ombuds exists to provide fair and equitable services and guidance to staff, faculty and graduate students. Often known as an "ear to the people," the ombuds is an off-the-record, neutral body, operating with confidentiality, impartiality, informality and independence.

2. What does the ombuds do?

- The ombuds meets with staff, faculty and graduate students who seek a confidential avenue for addressing complaints, concerns and inquiries.
- The ombuds listens and provides guidance to visitors by:
  - assisting in clarifying university policies
  - helping evaluate options for conflict resolution
  - referring visitors to the right resources
  - sharing tactics for effective communication during conflict(s)

3. What does the ombuds not do?

- The ombuds does not "solve" problems internally.
- The ombuds has no authority to take formal action in response to complaints, and they cannot compel officers or administrators to take specific actions.
- The ombuds does not take sides for or against any individual, cause or position.
- The ombuds does not keep or share records unless given permission to do so by the visitor (the only exception being when there is an imminent risk of serious harm).
- Conversations with ombuds staff do not constitute notice to the University of any administrative or legal claims.

4. Why is the ombuds at Syracuse University necessary?

The ombuds specializes in listening and ensuring that staff, faculty and graduate students have a neutral space to express concerns that might exist in the University community.

5. Whom does the ombuds report to and how?

The ombuds provides reports to the Chancellor in a way that is independent of existing structures. By tracking trends and addressing concerns, the ombuds can help make suggestions for resolving concerns and supporting systemic change.