OFFICE OF THE UNIVERSITY OMBUDS

ANNUAL REPORT

JULY 1, 2024-JUNE 30, 2025

For the Syracuse University Community

Syracuse University

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INTRODUCTION, HISTORY AND PHILOSOPHY

This serves as the 2024-25 annual report from Syracuse University Ombuds Neal Powless G'08. The report includes data from July 2024 through June 2025 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 2024-25 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 is 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.

> *My team visited the Ombuds due to personality conflict and transitions. Neal was not only kind, perceptive and well-versed in character and team building skills, he was also a lot of fun to work with. His humor and candor eased the tension in what could have been a very uncomfortable time, and I'm glad to say my team gained useful info about ourselves and each other.*
>
> REFLECTION FROM PRESENTATION

ACCOMPLISHMENTS

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

- Completed a University-wide survey regarding ombuds services
- Created a LinkedIn account with 2 weekly posts beginning December 2024
- Reached 1,000 total cases since the opening of the office in 2018
- The ombuds was a featured presenter at the International Ombuds Association (IOA) Annual conference in 2025

> *Neal has been incredibly helpful in the past when it comes to helping me sort through my thoughts and feelings, and I would really appreciate the opportunity to speak with him again.*
>
> ANONYMOUS VISITOR

OBSERVED TRENDS

1. Lack of transparency in communication and intentions from those in leadership roles resulting in a loss of trust
2. Feelings of fear, stress, tension and concerns about retaliation from others within the same space
3. Issues with responsiveness to and concerns regarding University polices resulting in feelings of isolation
4. Management styles, skills and behavior that have resulted in bullying and negative comments that have created feelings of a negative or even toxic environment
5. Concerns around job security, advancement or unsupported in career growth
6. Non-collaborative behavior impacting trust, teamwork and teambuilding

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> *Thank you for lifting my spirits during the times I could not even find hope! You have helped me meet myself again and I gained perspective.*
>
> ANONYMOUS VISITOR

REFLECTION FROM THE OMBUDS

As the Institution prepares to usher in a new era of leadership, it is good to understand that change is how humans learn and grow. A peaceful transfer of leadership is one of those changes that is core to a democratic process and can be a healthy thing for any organization, institution, or culture. How we react to a change in leadership, or any change we experience, is entirely up to each of us as individuals. The exciting thing about growth is that it provides an opportunity for a shift in energy.

Dr. Joe Dispenza says, "change your energy, change your life." Within the Haudenosaunee, the 15-stage condolence process is something that each leader goes through when put into a seat of leadership. The new leader goes through a condolence process to prepare for their role, and one of the earliest stages is to clear energy. Both Dispenza and the Haudenosaunee recognize that early in the process of maneuvering conflicts, understanding how to change your energy is important.

This report identifies trends in things that have transpired throughout the past fiscal year at Syracuse. For the trends that have contributed to negative energy within the institution, we should ask what lessons can we all learn from them? Among other things, those lessons learned often stem from a traumatic experience, making it hard to let go. This unwillingness to change can explain how and why we as humans experience similar conflicts in a multitude of environments. Another way to say this is to change your energy, change how you respond.

Changing how you respond can impact individuals within, as well as the whole environment. When a person suddenly acts in a new manner, it forces others to shift from acting from a habitual response, to a new one. Transformation to create requires change and growth. What you learn from this report, and how that impacts your choices is entirely up to you. The Ombuds Office will always be here as you explore options and how you want to respond. An abbreviated version of Ghandhi's quote can be applied here, "be the change you want to see."

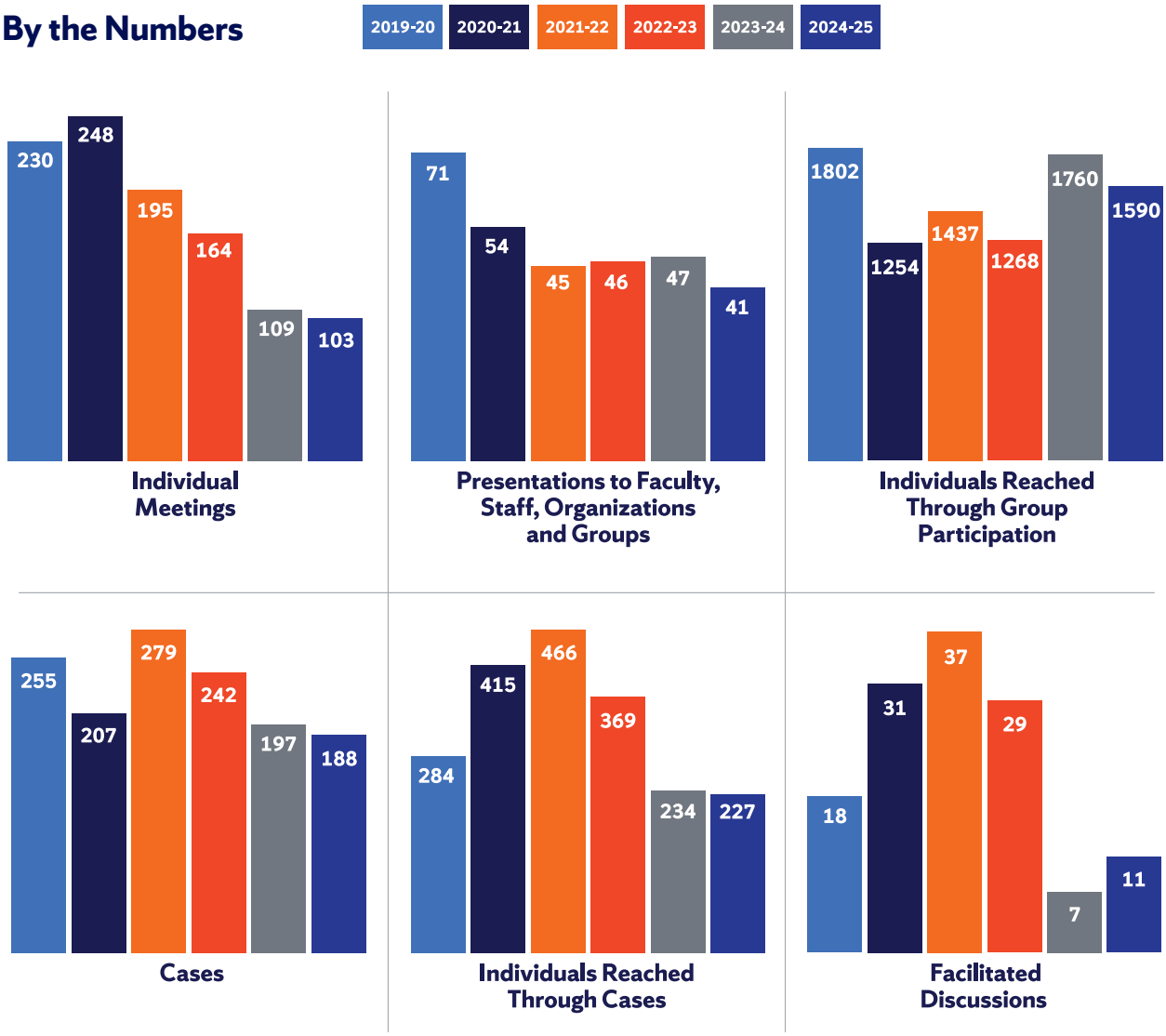
I am thankful for the bravery of each person who has come to the Ombuds Office to share their experience. Their courage to share what they went through has the potential to impact the institution in a positive way if we all agree to learn from the lesson. When the memory of an experience no longer has the emotional charge attached to it, it becomes wisdom. The Ombuds Office believes that understanding the energy within these trends has the power to become wisdom for all of us.

> *I really appreciated my meeting with the Ombuds, where I was given ample time to share the challenge I was experiencing and learn about relevant resources to support me on campus regarding this challenge. He also spent time helping me reflect on how to decide what course of action to take, without encouraging me to follow any particular path.*
>
> ANONYMOUS VISITOR

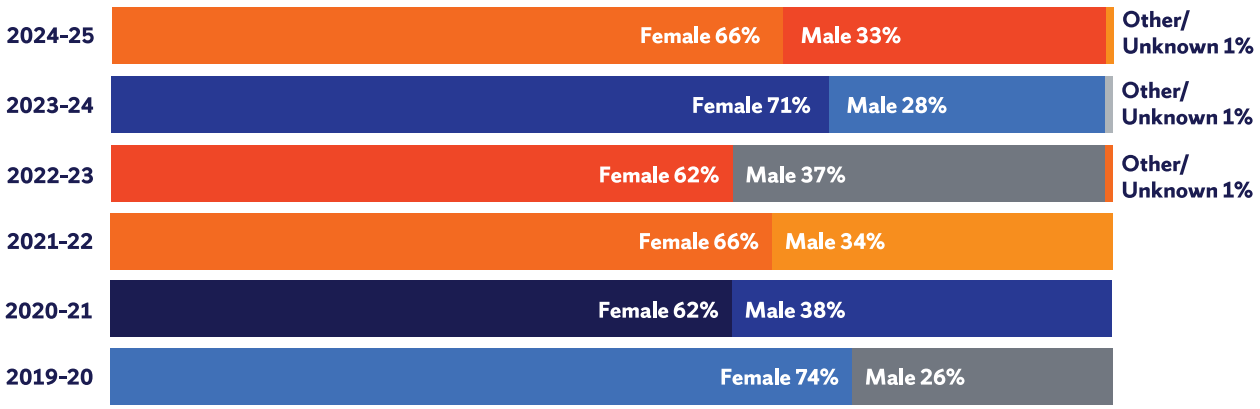
DATA FOR VISITORS AND OFFICE STATISTICS

Comparison by Fiscal Year

By the Numbers



Cases by Demographics



DATA FOR VISITORS AND OFFICE STATISTICS
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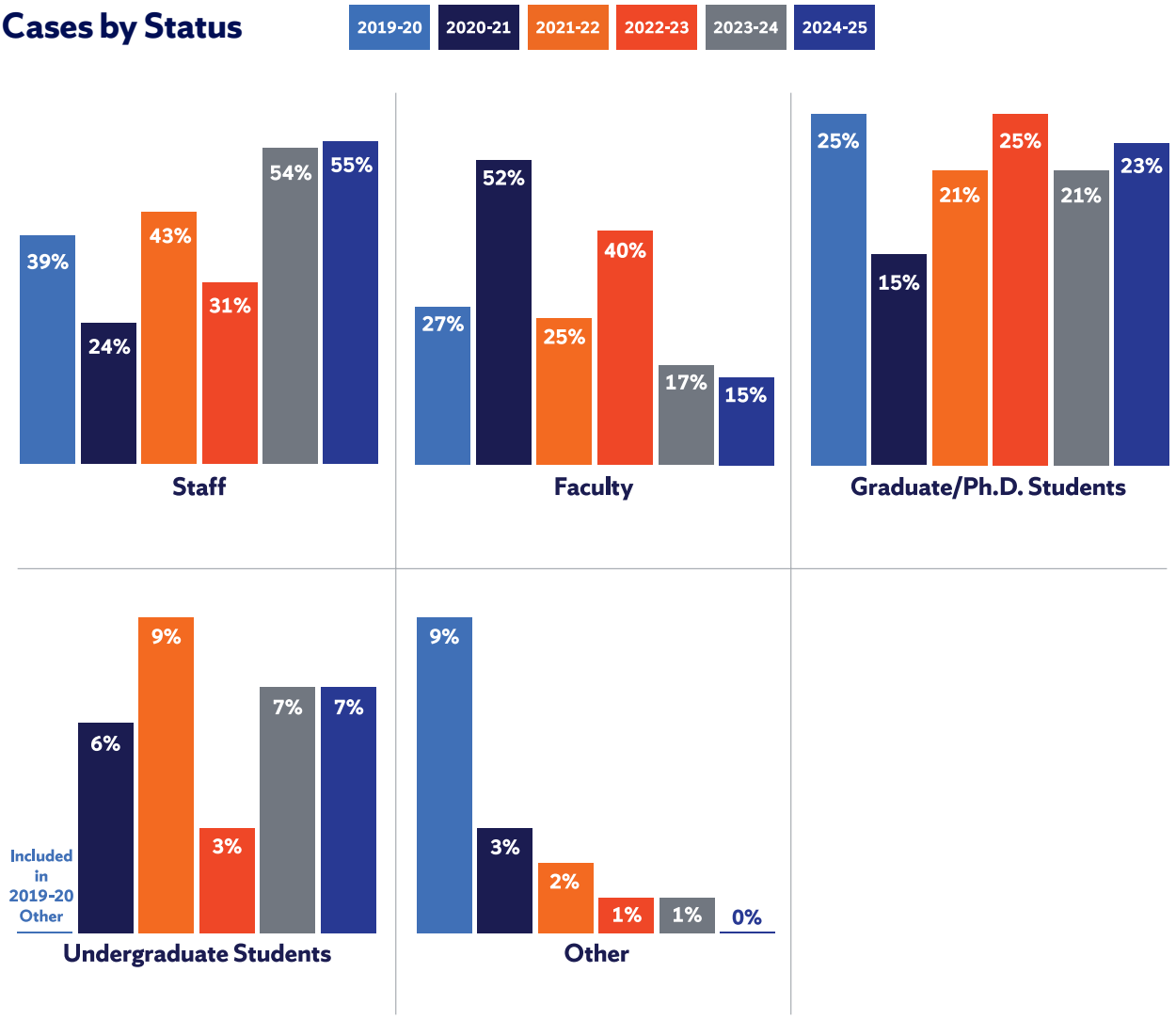
Cases by Status



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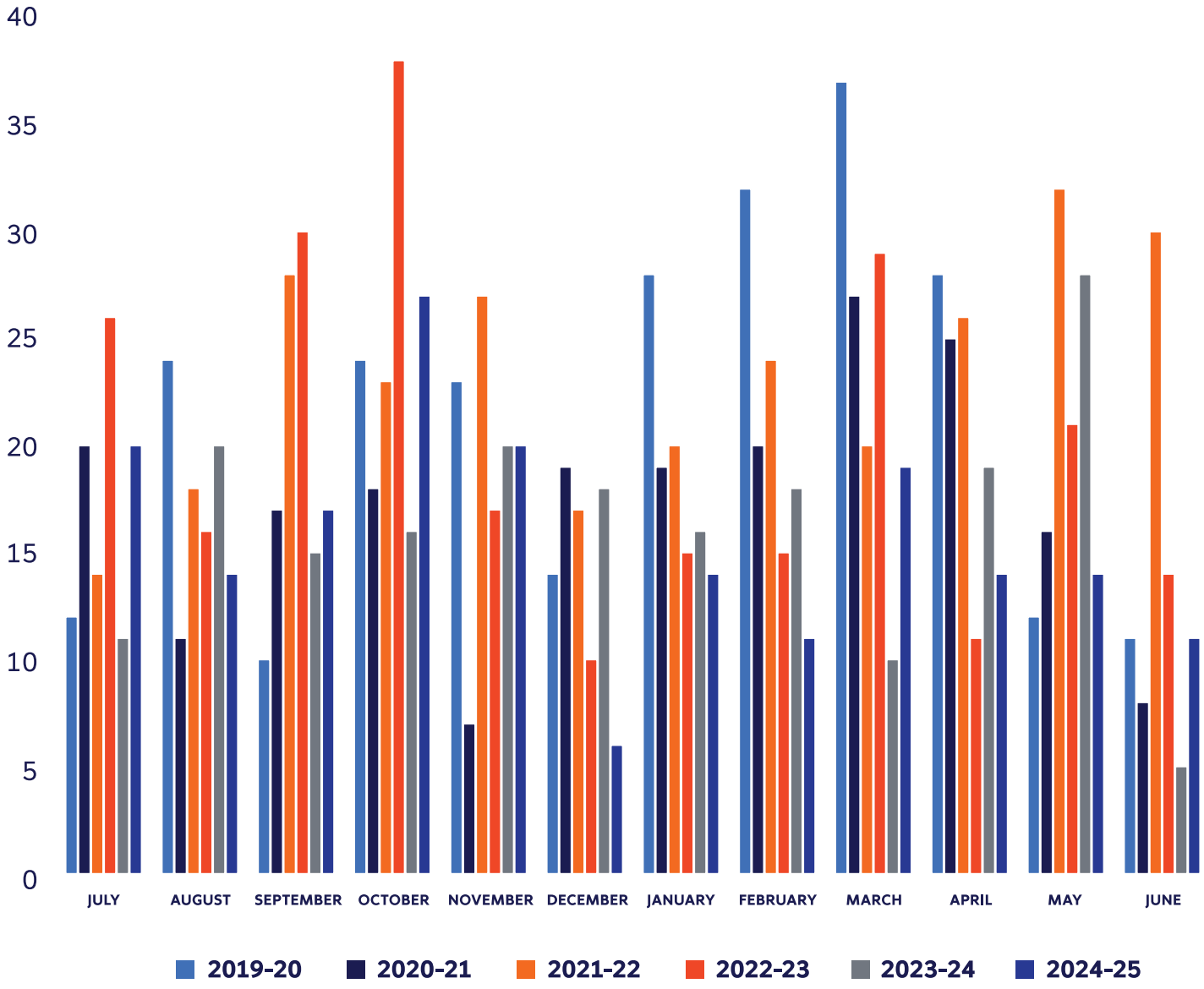
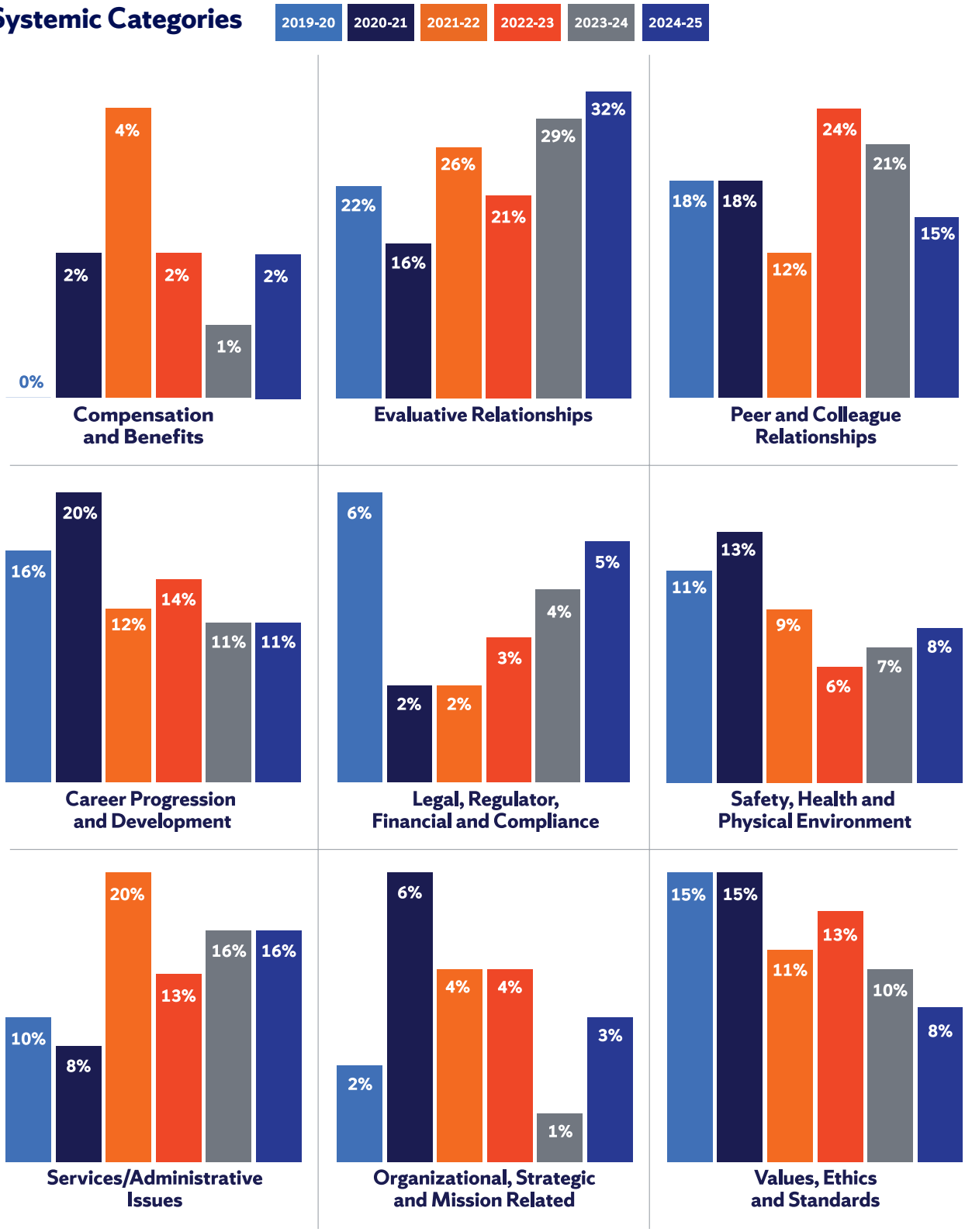
Fiscal Year Comparison of Case Loads



DATA FOR VISITORS AND OFFICE STATISTICS
(continued)

Systemic Categories



DATA FOR VISITORS AND OFFICE STATISTICS
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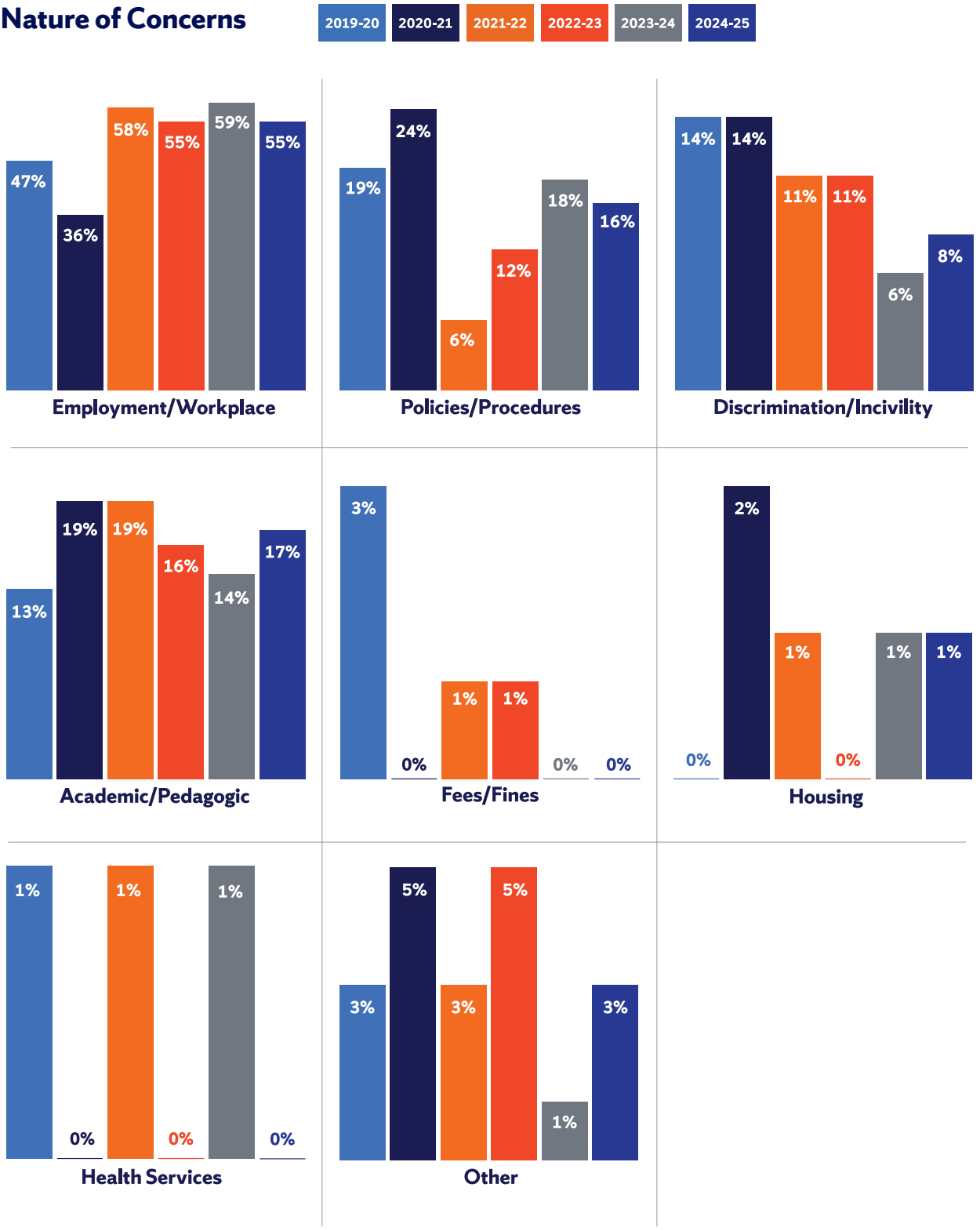
Nature of Concerns



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.