

**OFFICE OF THE UNIVERSITY OMBUDS**

# **ANNUAL REPORT**

**JULY 1, 2020-JUNE 30, 2021**

For: Syracuse University Community



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# INTRODUCTION, HISTORY AND PHILOSOPHY

This report serves as the 2020-21 annual report from Neal Powless, Syracuse University Ombuds. It includes data from July 2020 through June 2021 covering 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 serving in a variety of roles at the University since 2004. The ombuds’ office serves all graduate students, faculty and staff of Syracuse University.

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 have expressed finding great comfort in a confidential place to explore options to resolve the conflicts they are experiencing. Each visitor is given an opportunity to share their experience, without judgement, and explore what options fit best for them. This experience has been cathartic for many and has allowed visitors to be open to engage in behaviors and conversations that have led to resolution.

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“ Thank you so much for taking the time to meet with my team and me earlier today! We really appreciate the insight you shared and hearing about how you got into the role. We appreciate your willingness to connect again once we’ve had a chance to review some of the materials you suggested. ”

INDIVIDUAL MEETING

# ACCOMPLISHMENTS

This year the ombuds' office transitioned to meet the needs of the University community at large. Besides maintaining a consistent caseload, virtually through the pandemic, the office has expanded its efforts in the following areas:

- Presentations, professional development trainings and conflict management trainings
- Assistance to departments seeking to manage issues as they arise as well as long-standing concerns
- Invitations to address more complex issues of traumatic experiences between colleagues and even within toxic work environments
- Facilitated discussions between individuals and within small and large groups to create a space and process to discuss conflicts that have arisen
- Use of Zoom as a space where individuals and groups can interact

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“ Your work is making a real difference for me personally and for our committee. I anticipate that will translate into having a substantial, positive impact on our department. I highly value you as well as the spirit and skills you bring. Thank you. ”

ANONYMOUS VISITOR

## OBSERVED TRENDS

1. Members of the University community continue to be impacted by biases of others in relation to race, disability and gender that is experienced as discrimination
2. Bullying has become an issue of concern, which has occurred through hierarchal structures as well as peer-to-peer interactions (student-student, faculty-faculty, staff-staff)
3. Effective communication through transitions continues to be an issue for those in leadership positions
4. Many visitors have expressed concerns about those in leadership/advisory positions actively impeding their successful progression through academics or daily work

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“ Thank you, Neal, for meeting today. I really appreciated the opportunity to speak with you. Clearly you are talented at what you do. I’m excited to be leading our department into a number of new ventures this coming year. ”

ANONYMOUS VISITOR

# SUMMARY

Syracuse University, like the rest of the world, is in a space of transition as we continue to be impacted by COVID-19. Amid all this change, each person has their own perspective on how to handle it. What is certain is that change is happening, and we must all find a way to navigate it. As individuals struggle through conflict, the desire for compassion and acknowledgment is often most beneficial to calming things down and maneuvering into resolution.

As an institution that the surrounding community looks to for guidance, inspiration and entertainment above and beyond the educational experiences primary to its function, the University must be a forward-thinking space with basic values rooted in compassion. However, rises in the office’s “Peer and Colleague Relationships” and “Career Progression and Development” data highlight that there is an issue with how individuals continue to address each other in a detrimental way.

We can show compassion through an ability to adapt, an openness to listen and to learn from others’ experiences, a willingness to accept change, and a desire to communicate with civility. Sometimes this means taking a moment to reflect before lashing out at others in a detrimental or demeaning way. With solid effort and commitment, it is possible for us to treat each other respectfully and to navigate these transitions effectively as a university. The Ombuds Office is committed to supporting each of us to that end.

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“ I would like to thank you for sharing with my freshman honor students. It was a powerful and thought-provoking talk and one I am grateful for. I can only imagine how it resonated with the students too. Many thanks and in gratitude. ”

REFLECTION FROM PRESENTATION

# DATA

## Visitor Interactions

**248**

Individual Meetings

**58**

Presentations to Faculty, Staff,  
Organizations and Groups

**1,254**

Individuals Reached  
Through Group Participation

**207**

Cases

**415**

Individuals Reached  
Through Cases

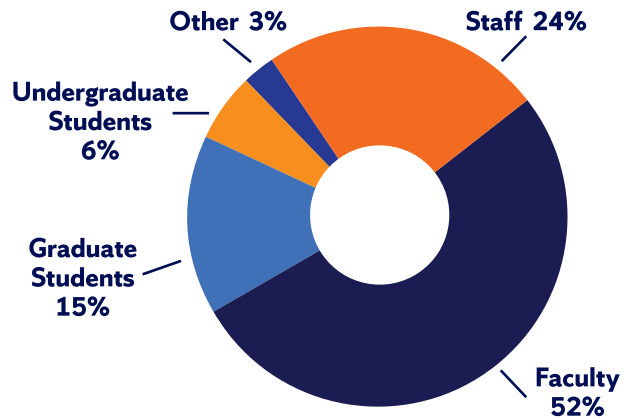
**31**

Facilitated Discussions

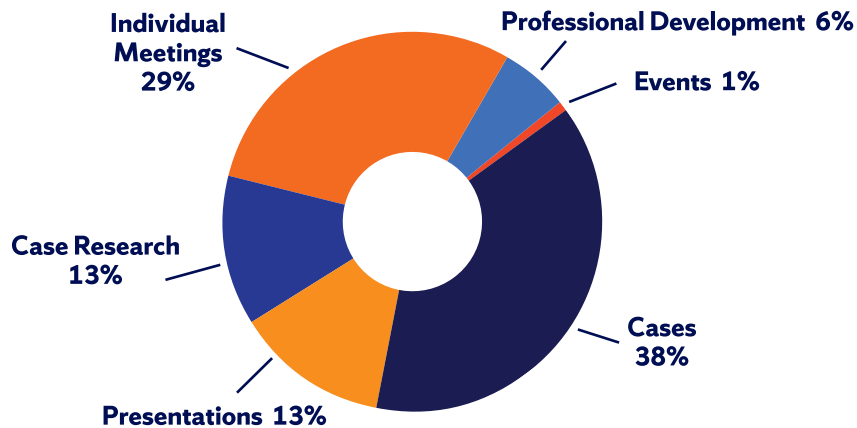
## Cases by Demographics



## Cases by Status



## Ombuds Time Breakdown

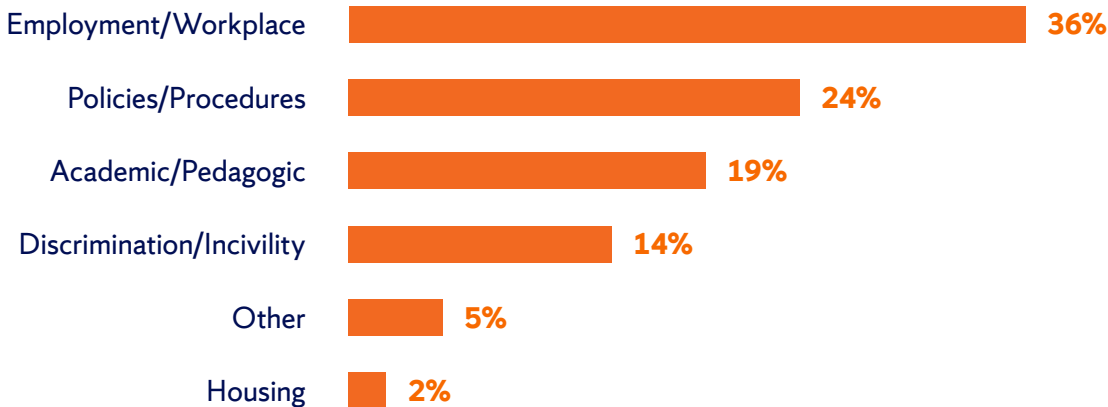


# DATA

## Systemic Categories Raised



## Nature of Concerns





# APPENDIX

## Five Common Questions About the University Ombuds Office

### 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.