

Office of the Ombudsperson
Annual Report
June 17, 2022 – June 16, 2023

Introduction

The Office of the Ombudsperson is a confidential, impartial, informal, and independent resource for conflict resolution for the entire Northwestern University community. The Office serves students, faculty, staff, administrators, alumni, families, etc. We work with anyone with an issue or concern related to Northwestern, or with a concern outside of Northwestern that affects their life at Northwestern.

The International Ombuds Association (IOA) Standards of Practice and Code of Ethics guide the functioning of our office (<https://www.ombudsassociation.org/standards-of-practice-code-of-ethics>). Ombudsperson Sarah Klaper is currently president-elect of the Board of Directors of the International Ombuds Association, and she co-chairs the Advocacy Committee for the IOA. She is considered a national expert on confidentiality and academic ombuds in the United States and regularly presents to a variety of leaders and organizations on that topic.

The Ombudsperson does:

- Actively Listen;
- Analyzes your situation related to relevant policies and procedures, organizational and interpersonal dynamics, etc.;
- Suggest options available to you (both informal and formal);
- Consult with other university resources;
- Provide coaching on communication best practices;
- Help to develop strategies;
- Provide feedback on written and verbal communication;
- Make referrals to other university and off-campus resources;
- Mediate;
- Facilitate difficult conversations;
- Help you find a path forward;
- Help you understand policies and procedures that apply to you;
- Empower visitors to advocate for themselves and their concerns;
- Provide upward feedback to university leadership about trends and concerns;
- Advocate for fairness and equity in policies and procedures.

The Ombudsperson does NOT:

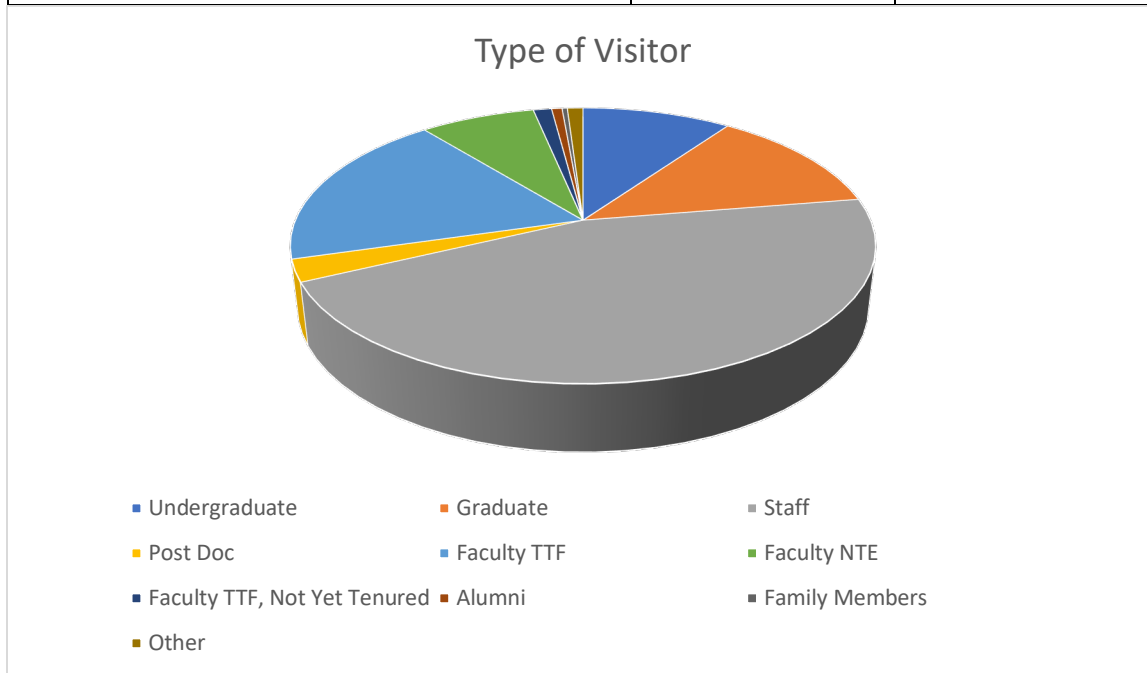
- Give legal advice;
- Conduct formal investigations or processes;
- Act as a decisionmaker regarding rules, policies, or procedures;
- Act as an “office of notice” for Northwestern University.

The Data

This year’s data demonstrates how quickly the utilization of the Office of the Ombudsperson has grown, as well as the effects of the extensive outreach performed by the Office. The Ombudsperson and Program Coordinator continued to spend a large amount of time providing presentations and meeting with leaders, divisions, departments, and students across the institution in order to inform the university community about the Office.

Types of Visitors

	2021-22	2022-23
Undergraduate	54	57
Graduate	49	73
Staff	117	264
Post Doc	1	15
Faculty, TTF	90	108
Faculty, TTF but not tenured yet	13	7
Faculty, NTE	52	44
Alumni	1	4
Family Members	0	2
Other	7	6
Total	361	580



Types of Concerns

Compensation	65
Evaluative Relationships	273
Communication	256
Respect/Treatment	243
Team Climate/Morale	235
Performance Mgt & Feedback	220
Interpersonal Differences	118
Peer & Colleague Relationships	
Communication	141
Interpersonal Differences	139
Respect/Treatment	135
Team Climate/Morale	126
Jobs & Career	
Workload & Schedule	105
Post Classification/Description	80
Terms of Contract	99
Career Progression Opportunities	78
Inadequate Staffing	52

Legal, Regulatory, Compliance	
Discrimination (except gender)	73
Retaliation	23
Investigation/Formal Processes	86
Gender Discrimination	71
Title IX	52
Faculty/Staff Performance	
Unprofessionalism	40
Deceitfulness/Rudeness	33
Derogatory Comments	29
Intimidation	24
Retaliation	21
Safety & Health	
Stress	67
Disability & Access	22

Organizational Leadership & Mgt	
Organizational Communication	93
Organizational Culture	97
Leadership/Mgt	141
Abuse of Authority	112
Values & Ethics	
Core Values	115
Accountability	136
Personal Conduct	133
Miscellaneous	
Facilitated Discussions	30
Mediation	14

Presentations/Workshops to a variety of departments and divisions (other than traditional Office Outreach):

- How To Disagree and Still Maintain Relationships
- Giving and Receiving Feedback
- Chairs' Welcome
- New Chairs Series – multiple sessions
- New Faculty Meeting
- Ombuds Day
- Big 10 Ombuds Meeting, University of Maryland
- De-Escalation Training
- Communication and Conflict Management
- International Ombuds Association Annual Conference
 - Creating Change When the Sun Doesn't Shine (In Your Institution)
 - Ombuds Confidentiality Update: Title IX and Clery Act
 - Quick and Dirty Tips for Effective Presenting and Public Speaking
- Mediation Class – Role and Road to Becoming an Ombuds
- Practical Conflict and Communication
- Disagreeing, Providing/Receiving Feedback, and Maintaining Relationships
- Managers' Corner: Difficult Conversations
- Building & Maintaining Trust in Trying Times

Trends, Concerns, and Recommendations

In this section of the annual report, the Ombudsperson discusses trends and concerns as discussed with her and observed by her through interactions with visitors and communications with others around the university.

Staff

The overwhelming majority of visitors to the Office of the Ombudsperson (46%) were staff members at all levels of the institution.* While the focus of any institution of higher learning is naturally going to be on students and faculty, staff are an essential component of the institution for their own roles, expertise, and experience, as well as for how they support research and the academic mission. Acknowledging staff with appropriate compensation is important. However, salary should be the starting consideration to maintain the level of expert staff that this institution requires to maintain its elite status. Additional priorities should include

- Professional development opportunities

* For the purposes of this report, "staff" include anyone above the level of department chair/center director, even if that person holds an academic appointment in addition to their administrative role. If the visitor's primary role, and subject of their visit, is their non-faculty/administrative role, this report defines them as staff.

- Defined job descriptions and duties (99 visitors)
- Promotional career paths and growth (78 visitors)
- Ongoing onboarding and support systems for new managers
- Respect for exempt staff time and work/life balance (105 visitors)
- Opportunities for acknowledgement and appreciation (243 faculty and staff visitors)
- Respect, collegiality, etc. (243 faculty and staff visitors)

Without all these components (and others that we have probably omitted), staff will not be seen as or feel like they are a priority. Departments/divisions and the institution will risk concerns with morale, turnover, loss of institutional knowledge, loss of effectiveness, and increased unionization efforts.

Communication and Evaluative Relationships

Visitors to the Office of the Ombudsperson focused much of their concerns on Evaluative Relationships (273 visitors), Communication in Evaluative Relationships (256 visitors), and Abuses of Authority (112 visitors). Communication in Peer Relationships was also identified as a concern (141 visitors); however, concerns within evaluative relationships between faculty/chairs, staff/supervisors, and students/faculty far exceeded the concerns with peers.

These numbers indicate an opportunity for growth in the onboarding and training of new and senior managers at Northwestern. Traditionally, many managers are elevated to their positions due to seniority or technical proficiency. However, they do not necessarily have the people or leadership skills to manage the individuals who work for them, or with whom they must collaborate in their current roles. Additionally, some managers are hired for positions due to their related, but not exact, experience in addition to their potential. These transitions to new roles require supports to ensure success as managers. Increased institutional training would be helpful on managerial skills such as

- communication
- giving and receiving feedback
- setting expectations
- managing behavior and performance concerns
- handling conflict
- empowering and inspiring a team
- leading change, etc.

In addition, it would be extremely helpful for staff and staff managers to have opportunities for professional coaching similar to their faculty and administrative leader counterparts. The Center for Leadership model for faculty and administrators could be either expanded (with appropriate staffing and support) or used as a model to create a parallel program for staff within HR or another location. This Office looks forward to its continued collaborations with Human Resources in its ongoing efforts toward an improved onboarding system, increased employee relations trainings and roles, manager foundations programming, etc.

Accountability

Accountability is a consistent theme with visitors to the Office of the Ombudsperson (136 visitors). Generally, concerns continue to be raised about the privileges of tenure and manager status in preventing accountability for bad behavior that does not rise to the level of a Title IX or Non-Discrimination Policy violation. Many visitors assert that it is useless to “report” an issue to a supervisor/dean or HR because “nothing will be done” and bullying or harassing behavior is allowed to continue. In the alternative, if it is addressed, visitors fear severe retaliation for taking action against the behavior.

Several offices across the institution, including the Provost’s Office, Compliance & Risk Management, Human Resources, Student Affairs, etc. are currently developing and evaluating proposals to create explicit expectations around behavior, as well as increase mechanisms for accountability. The Office of the Ombudsperson is proud to collaborate with these offices in this effort.

Students

Students continue to face challenges regarding communication and conflict. The reality of being “canceled” remains dire. Students who both have and have not gone through formal processes at NU are taking it upon themselves to publicly call out other students who they believe are “bad actors” and get other people to join in make the decision that the other student does not belong at NU. The subject student can suffer harassment, bullying, exclusion from student organizations and social groups, exclusion from group work in classes, exclusion from all social connections, and general shunning. These reactions are for something they might or might NOT have done, a perception concern, or a misunderstanding. It is sometimes as a result of something that the university has already addressed, but other students are not aware or do not agree with the outcome. It is an extremely high mental, physical, and educational burden on the subject student.

Similar to last year, many University offices have been working diligently with students, families, and colleagues to address the issue. The situation still requires reframing the student culture to focus on the kind environment we/students want to create and live in at Northwestern University? Helping students to create and effectuate that vision and shifting the culture toward increasing communication and discussion will help students learn about mistakes and misunderstandings and grow from them.

Faculty

Faculty concerns in the past year also surrounded communication with administration and with peer collaborators. Long-simmering concerns that had never been properly addressed affected many of the faculty visitors to the office. The Ombudsperson assisted through many faculty mediations, facilitated discussions, and made referrals to other offices that could provide assistance. Some concerns that were prevalent in faculty visitors this year included conflict around identity, ethnically and gender-diverse junior and NTE faculty finding their way with more-senior faculty, who were predominantly white and men, and who were not receptive to

identity-related concerns regarding curriculum decisions, resource distribution, consistent behavior expectations, accountability, and student issues. The power dynamic between tenured faculty and junior or NTE faculty aggravates the situation in that the junior or NTE faculty tend to feel unempowered to address the situation. Express and consistent behavior and cultural expectations from university and school leadership would help to alleviate this stress and to provide a sense of safety in untenured faculty.

Faculty have also been struggling to work with student and grad student evolving expectations regarding faculty commitment to student success, career progression, and mental health. Faculty are attempting to balance professional and curricular expectations with student needs and students' changing attitudes toward the inherent authority and expertise of faculty. This area is truly evolving. The Ombudsperson has worked with many faculty to increase meaningful transparency in decision making that does not abdicate the faculty member's authority over their curriculum, professional requirements, judgment, etc.

The Ombudsperson has also worked with many women faculty in both the NTE and tenured faculty lines regarding salary equity concerns. Concerns about salary comparisons with male colleagues, the priority and allocation of service obligations, the value of different scholarship contributions, and secrecy around salary levels creates a great deal of frustration and anxiety. The Provost's Office is attempting to address salary equity concerns. Greater transparency at the school and department level regarding clear expectations, attention to equity in service allocation, attention to allocation of service obligations, and salary information would be incredibly helpful to alleviate these concerns.

Mediation and Conflict Resolution Initiative

The Office of the Ombudsperson has partnered with OIDI to create a Conflict Resolution and Mediation Initiative pilot program starting in August 2023. The Ombudsperson and OIDI have collaborated with the School for Professional Studies to provide a 40-hour mediation training to 24 university staff from around the institution. These staff will continue to receive professional development throughout the year so that they can be deployed in a co-mediator model to mediate conflict throughout the university.

Goals of this Initiative include:

- increasing capacity for mediation (currently, the Ombudsperson is the only mediator for the university community)
- increase knowledge and usage of mediation, effective conflict resolution, and leadership skills throughout the university both in mediation and daily work settings
- work to shift the culture at Northwestern to one in which conflict is seen as a normal part of human life and discussion is seen as a first option to resolve concerns
- work toward mediation and facilitated discussions being seen and accepted as integral to reducing and resolving escalated conflicts before they reach the point of requiring formal action.

Office of the Ombudsperson Sustainability

The Office of the Ombudsperson was created after approximately eight years of advocacy by Faculty Senate, the Organization of Women Faculty, NUSAC, and graduate students. Utilization of the office has grown beyond what most people at Northwestern express was their expectation. The effectiveness of the Office is directly visible in the growing number of visitors, requests for mediation, and requests for workshops. It is indirectly visible through feedback from leaders such as, “I could tell that X person had spoken with you prior to coming to see me. They were much more organized, thoughtful, and able to engage logically than they have been in the past.” In addition, both Office visitors and university leaders regularly refer visitors to the Office. “I felt like I could not do anything about this situation, but then three separate people, including my supervisor, told me to come speak to you.”

The Office of the Ombudsperson is currently staffed by University Ombudsperson Sarah Klaper and Program Coordinator Carrie Thomas. The visitor, mediation, and workshop load of this institution is not sustainable with one ombudsperson and this office requires additional staffing. Our peer institutions with ombuds offices are more-adequately staffed than Northwestern’s office. Northwestern must fully staff this office if it wants to maintain the office and increase its effectiveness across the institution.

The institutions below with more than one ombuds have visitor loads of approximately **100-300 visitors per ombuds**. **Northwestern’s Office of the Ombudsperson served 580 visitors** in the last reporting year, and that number appears to be growing.

University	Number of Ombuds	Staff	Who they serve
University of Michigan	4	1	2 Faculty 1 Staff 1 Student
Penn State	1FT; 30+ Unit Ombuds; 3 Grad Student Ombuds		Faculty & Grad Students
University of Iowa	2; 1 FT 1 PT 1 Vacancy	1	Faculty, Staff, Students
University of Nebraska, Lincoln	2		Faculty & Staff
USC	2; 1 - Main Campus 1 – Medical Campus	1	Faculty, Staff, Students
UCLA	3	1	Faculty, Staff, Students

University of Maryland	1 – Faculty 1 – Staff		Faculty & Staff
Harvard	4 FT; 1 Consulting; 2 Staff	2	Faculty, Staff, Students
Stanford	2; 1 – Main Campus 1 – Medical Campus		Faculty, Staff, Students
Duke	3		Faculty, Staff, Students
Columbia	2	1	Faculty, Staff, Students
Brown	1		Faculty, Staff, Students
Cornell	2		Faculty, Staff, Students
Dartmouth	1		Faculty, Staff, Students
U. Penn	2		Faculty, Staff, Students
MIT	2	1	Faculty, Staff, Students
WashU St. Louis	5		Faculty, Staff, Students
Boston University	4; 3 – FT 1 – Consulting		Faculty, Staff, Students