

Texas A&M University

Graduate Student Ombuds Services

Annual Report

AY 2018-2019

Introduction

Role of the Ombuds Officer

The Ombuds Officer advocates for the fair processes of graduate education and provides equal, open access to all parties: graduate and professional students, staff, faculty, and administrators. The university is a large and complex institution, and graduate and professional students often play multiple roles (e.g., student, research collaborator, teacher, technician, and peer). Misunderstandings and conflicts can arise in any one of these roles. Having a confidential conversation with an Ombuds Officer can be a first step for visitors who do not know where to turn. The Ombuds Officer serves as an informal, independent, neutral, and confidential resource for persons to discuss questions and concerns related to graduate education.

The Graduate and Professional Student Ombuds Officer is guided and informed by the [Code of Ethics and Standards of Practice](#) of the International Ombudsman Association. The Ombuds Officer promotes the University mission of excellence in graduate education by providing a service to support and facilitate environments in which graduate students can thrive and prosper.

Meeting with an Ombuds Officer

Individuals can make an appointment with the Ombuds Officer through the Office of Graduate and Professional Studies at ombuds@tamu.edu. In person, phone, and Skype appointments are available. In some cases, the visitor and Ombuds Officer identify a solution after one visit. More complicated cases often involve multiple visits.

Potential Topics of Conversation

Visitors discuss a number of topics with the Ombuds Officer, including but not limited to:

- Academic related issues, such as grade disputes, testing procedures, and instructor-student misunderstandings.
- Intellectual property.
- Interpersonal conflicts, lab politics, and problems with workplace climate.
- Professional ethics.
- Advice on how to have difficult conversations.
- Concerns about procedural fairness or due process.
- Conflicts between graduate students and their research advisors.
- Concerns about inequities in work expectations and/or funding opportunities.
- Disagreements with or misunderstandings of university policy/procedure.
- Cultural conflicts.
- Concerns about unethical or inappropriate behavior.

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The [Code of Ethics and Standards of Practice](#) of the International Ombudsman Association (IOA) guide our practice of ombudstry. The IOA Code of Ethics informs the types of activities in which an ombuds officer can and cannot engage.

An Ombuds Officer can listen and help visitors achieve a better understanding of a problem; help visitors find information applicable to their situation and identify possible solutions to a problem; help visitors identify options for resolving disagreements and conflicts with colleagues, faculty, staff, and advisors; and refer visitors to formal grievance or appeal procedures if they wish to engage in a formal process.

An Ombuds Officer cannot advocate for the university or the student, or any particular point of view; make or change University decisions, rules, or policies; participate in formal grievance procedures; or conduct formal investigations or provide legal advice.

Operating Principles

International Ombudsman Association*



Confidential. The Ombuds Officer holds all communications with those seeking assistance in strict confidence and does not disclose confidential communications. The only exceptions occur when the Ombuds Officer is bound to disclose information under the conditions of Texas law and university regulations or if the visitor gives permission to share information.

Neutral and Impartial. The Ombuds Officer, as a designated neutral, remains unaligned and impartial. The Ombuds Officer does not engage in any situation which could create a conflict of interest.

Informal. The Ombuds Officer, as an informal resource, does not participate in any formal adjudicative or administrative procedure related to concerns brought to her or his attention.

Independent. The Ombuds Officer is independent in structure, function, and appearance to the highest degree possible within the university.

* <http://www.ombudsassociation.org/About-Us/IOA-Standards-of-Practice-IOA-Best-Practices/Code-of-Ethics.aspx>

Ombuds Officer Services

When a visitor comes to the office with an issue of concern, this is considered a case. If the Ombuds Officer sees a visitor a number of times about the same issue, this is recorded as a single case. In the example, we track the number of visits for each case. Meetings can include multiple individuals.

In this report, we focus on (1) demographics, (2) the person with whom a student reported having a concern, and (3) the issue of concern. Sometimes students reported that they had concerns with more than a single person or issue. In these cases, we included the primary person involved, and the primary concern, in data reports. We present data for AY19 and trends for FY16 to FY19.

These reports are from the perspective of the visitor.

Visitor Statistics (2018 – 2019)

In FY19, Ombuds Officers met with 97 visitors: 35 in the Fall, 39 in the Spring, and 23 in the Summer. Most of the visits ($n = 60$, 62%) occurred in person, followed by telephone meetings ($n = 28$, 29%), and video conference ($n = 4$, 4%).

The Ombuds Officer made an average of 1.32 contacts per visitor ($SD = .89$) and spent an average of 61.96 minutes on each case ($SD = 39.75$)

Demographics

The majority of visitors to the Ombuds office were women and Non-Hispanic White students. Exhibit 1 provides detailed demographic information of the visitors, as well as the corresponding proportion of graduate students at the university.

Relative to their proportion of students at the university, women, Non-Hispanic White, Non-Hispanic Black, and Hispanic/Latino students were more likely to visit the Ombuds Office.

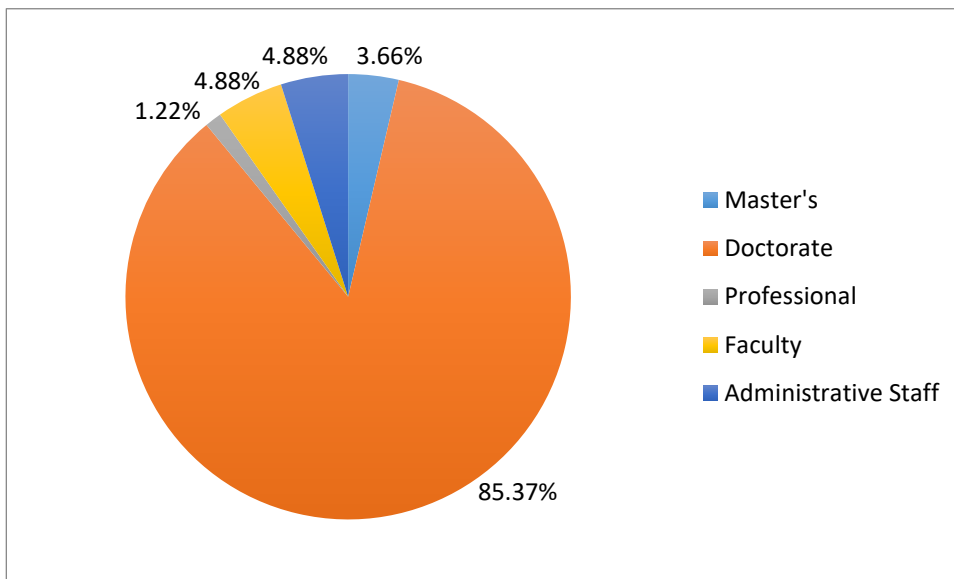
Exhibit 1. Visitor Demographics

	Percent	Percent at TAMU
Gender		
Women	53.6%	45.6%
Men	46.4%	54.4%
Ethnicity		
American Indian/Alaska Native	0%	.1%
Asian	4.3%	7.1%
Black, Non-Hispanic	8.7%	3.9%
Hispanic/Latino	15.2%	12.6%
International	27.2%	31%
White, Non-Hispanic	44.6%	41.2%

Visitor Role

As seen in Exhibit 2, the majority of the visitors were doctoral students, followed by administrative staff and faculty, Master's students, and professional students.

Exhibit 2. Visitor Roles at the University



Visitor College Affiliation

Exhibit 3 provides information about the college affiliations of the visitors. As a point of comparison, the same exhibit includes the relative proportion of students from that college in Fall 2018.

Most visitors to the Ombuds Office came from three colleges: Engineering, Education and Human Development, and Agriculture and Life Sciences.

Visitors from Agriculture and Life Sciences, Education and Human Development, and Engineering represented a larger share of total visitors than their corresponding share of all graduate and professional students at the university.

Exhibit 3. Visitors by College

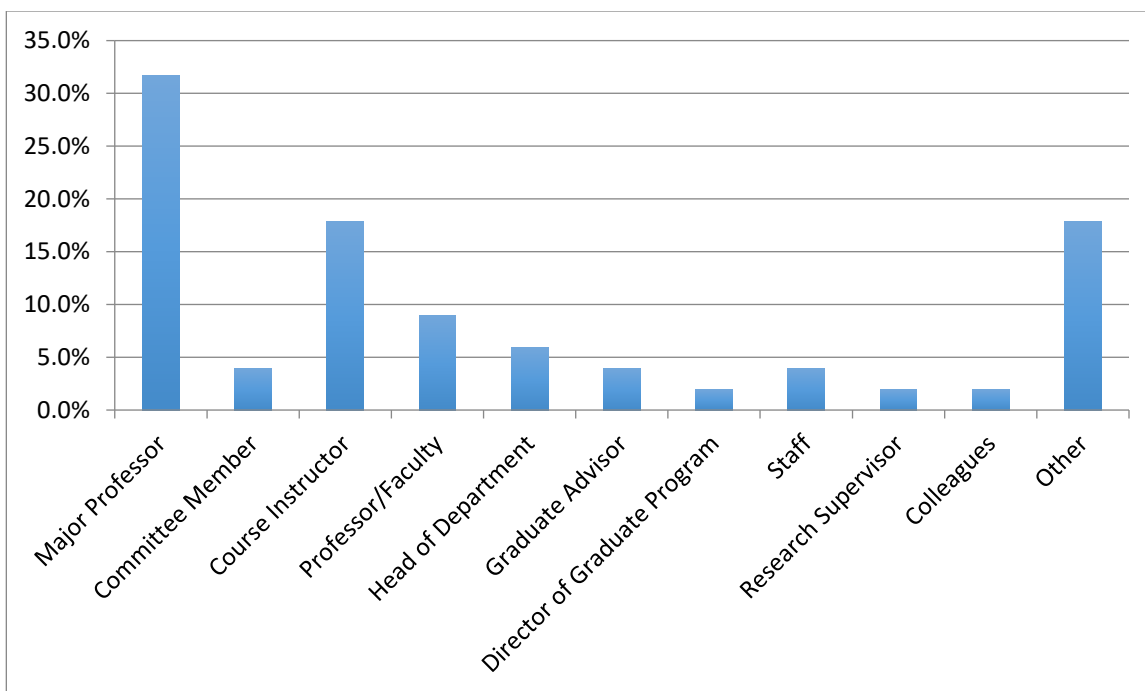
College	Percent	Percent at TAMU
Agriculture and Life Sciences	18.1%	7.7%
Bush School	5.3%	3.5%
Mays Business School	1.1%	8.7%
Education and Human Development	18.1%	10.6%
Engineering	31.9%	25.7%
Geosciences	3.2%	2.5%
Liberal Arts	8.5%	5.6%
Medicine	1.1%	4.7%
Law	1.1%	4.4%
Public Health	2.1%	2.5%
Science	3.2%	7.7%
Veterinary Medicine and Biological Sciences	6.4%	5.6%

Nature of the Visit

The majority of students who visited the Ombuds Office expressed concerns with their major professor (i.e., dissertation chair), followed by their course instructor (see Exhibit 4).¹

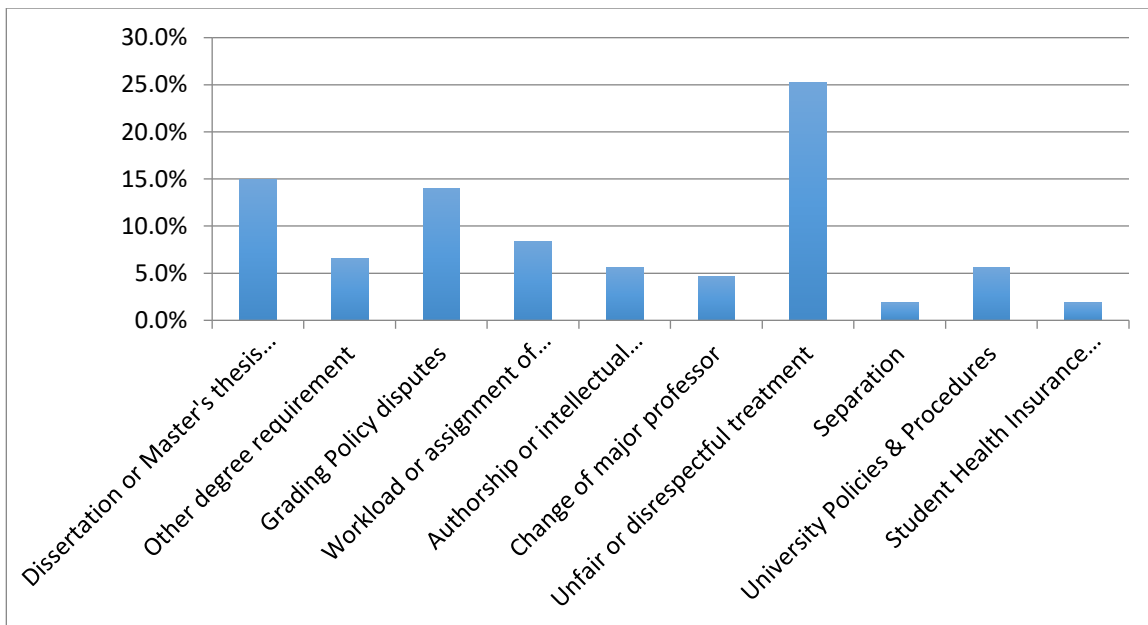
Approximately 25.2% of visitors shared concerns about receiving unfair or disrespectful treatment (see Exhibit 5). Examples of disrespectful treatment given by visitors included name calling and/or shouting by faculty, FERPA violations by faculty and staff, and gaslighting from major professors. About 15% sought assistance regarding conflict with dissertation or thesis requirements with primary concerns of faculty advisors not providing guidance on dissertation research or requirements and/or frequently changing requirements. Grade disputes (14%) closely followed as the third leading purpose for visiting the Ombuds Office.

Exhibit 4. Primary Source of Concern



¹ Major Professor = dissertation/faculty advisor; Professor/Faculty = a student's instructor or a member of the student's dissertation committee; Research Supervisor = individual who supervises a student's work tasks related to research projects, not faculty/dissertation advisor (e.g., lab supervised by postdoctoral fellow or clinical faculty).

Exhibit 5. Nature of Visit



Nature of Visit by Gender, Ethnicity, and College

Of all female visitors to the Ombuds Office, 31.4% expressed conflict with their major professor followed by their course instructor (27.5%). For male visitors, 40% noted conflict with their major professor.

Across all ethnic groups, the top issue brought to the Ombuds Office was conflict with their major professor. This was followed by conflict with course instructor for international students, Asian Americans, and White, non-Hispanic students (24%, 25%, and 23.1%, respectively).

Women were more likely as men to visit the Ombuds Office with concerns of receiving unfair and disrespectful treatment (40% and 16.7%, respectively) and grading disputes (20% and 11.9%, respectively). Asian American, Latino, and international students also shared concerns of unfair and disrespectful treatment (75%, 46.2%, and 36%, respectively). White, non-Hispanic visitors indicated unfair and disrespectful treatment (20.5%) and grading dispute concerns at lower rates (12.8%).

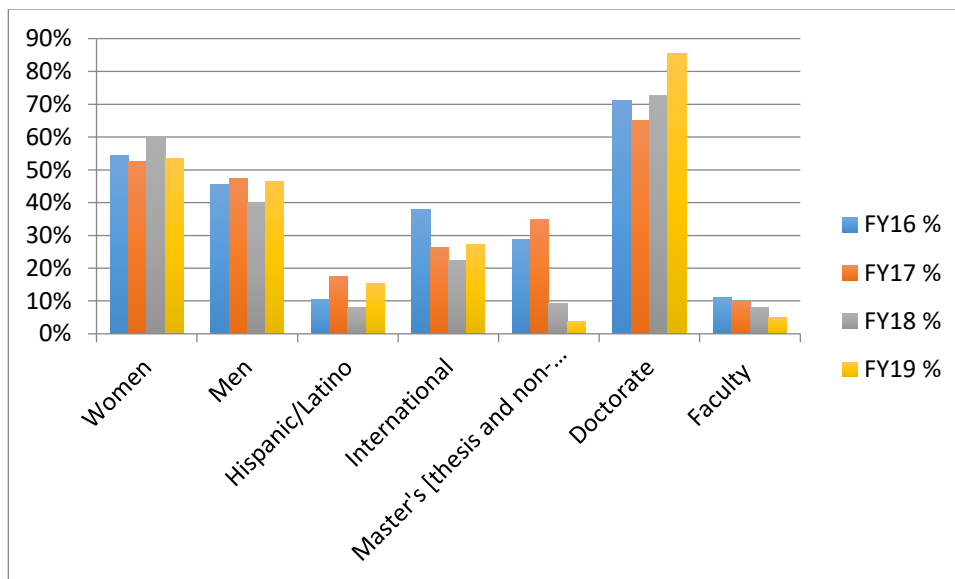
Over a third of visitors from the Engineering (37%) and Agricultural and Life Sciences (43.8%) discussed issues of receiving unfair and disrespectful treatment. For both colleges, this was closely followed by conflicts with unclear or constantly changing dissertation and thesis requirements (Engineering 37%; Agricultural and Life Sciences 31.3%).

Comparisons Over Time, FY16 to FY19

The number of unique visitors to the Graduate Ombuds Office remained relatively steady over the past four years: FY16 = 80; FY17 = 95; FY18 = 90; FY19 = 97.

In FY19, relative to previous years, the Ombuds Office saw the highest proportion of doctoral students. Compared to FY18, there was an increase of Hispanic/Latino, International, and male students. Overall, there appears to be a downward trend of faculty and master's students utilizing the Ombuds Office.

Exhibit 6. Demographic Differences, FY16 – FY19



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Major Professor, as the Primary Source of Concern brought to the Ombuds Office, appears to be steady across the four years with Course Instructor increasing significantly in FY19.

Unfair and Disrespectful Treatment as the Nature of Visit did not appear to have any appreciable change from FY16 to FY19.

Exhibit 7. Primary Source of Concern, FY16 – FY19

Person Involved	FY16 %	FY17 %	FY18 %	FY19 %
Major Professor	31.5	39.1	48.7	31.7
Committee Member	4.1	0	0	4
Course Instructor	2.7	7.2	9	17.8
Professor/Faculty	12.3	18.8	12.8	8.9
Head of Dept., Program, or Unit	20.5	7.2	1.3	5.9
Graduate Advisor	6.8	2.9	0	4
Director of Graduate Program (Faculty)	2.7	2.9	3.8	2
Staff (Dept., Unit, or University)	2.7	2.9	5.1	4
Research Supervisor	1.4	0	0	2
Colleagues (Grad, UG, Post-Doc)	5.5	2.9	2.6	2
Other	9.6	10.1	16.7	17.8

Exhibit 8. Nature of Visit, FY16 – FY19

Issue or Concern	FY16 %	FY17 %	FY18 %	FY19 %
Dissertation or Thesis Requirements	11.3	17.1	19.2	15
Other degree requirements	1.3	7.1	3.8	6.5
Grading policies and disputes	3.8	17.1	7.7	14
Workload or assignment duties	15	4.3	7.7	8.4
Authorship or intellectual property	7.5	2.9	2.6	5.6
Change of major professor, committee, or dept.	8.8	12.9	10.3	4.7
Unfair or disrespectful treatment	23.8	22.9	23.1	25.2
Separation (probation, suspension, dismissal)	13.8	2.9	10.3	1.9
Leave of absence (medical, financial, family)	2.5	4.3	0	0
Return after separation or leave of absence	1.3	1.4	1.3	0
Other	11.3	7.1	14.1	11.2