

Texas A&M University

Graduate Student Ombuds Services
Annual Report

2014-2015

A safe place to talk and explore solutions

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Introduction

Overview

- Graduate study represents an exciting, intellectually stimulating and challenging time in a student's career. Occasionally problems may arise that students do not feel comfortable discussing with their faculty advisor, director of graduate studies, or department head. Problems or issues may also seem too complex to address, or students feel unsure where to start. The Ombuds Officer can help, serving as a neutral third party that hears concerns in an informal and confidential setting.
- 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.
- The Ombuds Officer goals include helping students resolve problems early, before situations worsen to the level of possible engagement in formal grievance procedures. Sometimes an informal conversation will suffice. Other times students may require additional help, such as gathering information about a university policy or suggestions for facilitating difficult conversation with a faculty member. Regardless of a problem's scope, the Ombuds Officer can assist and act as advocate for fair policies and processes during problem solving.
- We welcome questions from faculty about how to best help graduate students. Sometimes faculty need help identifying the many university policies applicable to graduate students. The Ombuds Officer can also offer guidance on where students can obtain help on issues regarding professional relationships, academic performance, work assignments, etc.
- In addition to helping students directly, the Ombuds Officer submits problem patterns to university administration, aiming to effect positive change for graduate students.

Meeting with an Ombuds Officer

- Students can make appointments with the Ombuds Officer through the Office of Graduate and Professional Studies at ombuds@tamu.edu. Although we currently do not accept walk-in appointments, we work hard to see students as quickly as possible. Face-to-face meetings represent the preferred method to discuss student concerns. However, we will accommodate off-campus students or those who cannot come to the office, using phone meetings or other methods.
- During a meeting, the Ombuds Officer will listen, evaluating a problem and determining whether the situation is one in which the Ombuds Officer can assist. If so, the Ombuds Officer will work with the student to identify solutions. If not, the Ombuds Officer will direct the student to other individuals or resources that can help.

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- In some cases, one visit can produce a problem solution. Other cases require multiple visits.

Standards of Practice

- The **Code of Ethics** and **Standards of Practice** of the International Ombudsman Association (IOA) guides our practice of ombudstry. The graduate student Ombuds Officer is a member of the IOA and participates in their training. The graduate student Ombuds Officer is committed to upholding the IOA principles.

IOA Code of Ethics

INDEPENDENT
of other units in
organization

NEUTRAL
remains unaligned and
impartial

CONFIDENTIAL
holds all
communications in
strict confidence

INFORMAL
does not participate in
any formal
adjudicative procedure

Ombuds Function

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 students achieve a better understanding of a problem.
 - Help students find information applicable to their situation and identify possible solutions to a problem.
 - Explain University policies and procedures and how they apply to the student and their situation.
 - Help students identify options for resolving disagreements and conflicts with colleagues, faculty, staff, and advisors.
 - Help students achieve fair and equitable solutions to problems.
 - Provide other types of assistance to help students resolve a problem informally.
 - Refer students 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.
 - Set aside a decision or supersede the authority of another University official.
 - Participate in formal grievance procedures.
 - Conduct formal investigations or provide legal advice.
 - Testify in in formal proceedings with respect to confidential communication.

Visitor Statistics

Background

- The Office of Graduate & Professional Studies (OGAPS) has offered ombuds services for about a decade. In order to better serve our students, in 2012 we began keeping statistics about the types of issues brought to ombuds officers. Between Academic Years (AY) 2012 and 2014 OGAPS employed a case management system. During AY 2014-2015 OGAPS developed and implemented an updated case management system. Because data gathered using the two collection systems differs somewhat, we organized visitor statistics reporting into two sections: the first including data for AY 2012-2013 and AY 2013-2014, and the second for data from AY 2014-2015.
- These reports reflect only new cases. The IOA recommends that reporting focus on number of new cases rather than number of overall visits because with more complicated cases involving multiple visits, reporting each visit could skew reporting numbers.
- For each of the three years reported below there were 31, 21, and 21 inquiries, respectively, directed to more appropriate channels (e.g., Student Business Services, International Student Services, or thesis processors in the Office of Graduate and Professional Studies) by ombuds staff. These inquiries did not result in a visit with an ombuds officer.
- Both data sets include the person with whom a student reported having a concern and also the issue of concern. Sometimes students reported that they had concerns with more than a single person or issue. In these cases, the primary person involved, and the primary concern, was included in data reports.

Academic Years 2012-2013 and 2013-2014

Over this two-year period, OGAPS reported 92 new visits. 48 came from AY 2012-2013 and 44 came from AY 2013-2014. Reports of the person involved and the issue of concern did not vary substantially by year; hence, the data were collapsed across academic year. About an equal number of visitors were doctoral and masters students (Figure 1). Of the master's students, about an equal number were thesis and non-thesis option.

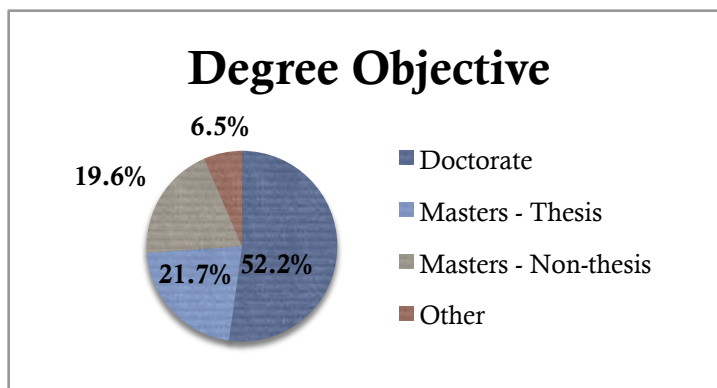


Figure 1. Degree objectives of the 92 visitors. 'Other' includes students not yet enrolled and a postdoctoral fellow.

- Given the integral role that major professors play in graduate student education and training, unsurprisingly, professors represent the most common individual graduate students report having an issue of concern with.

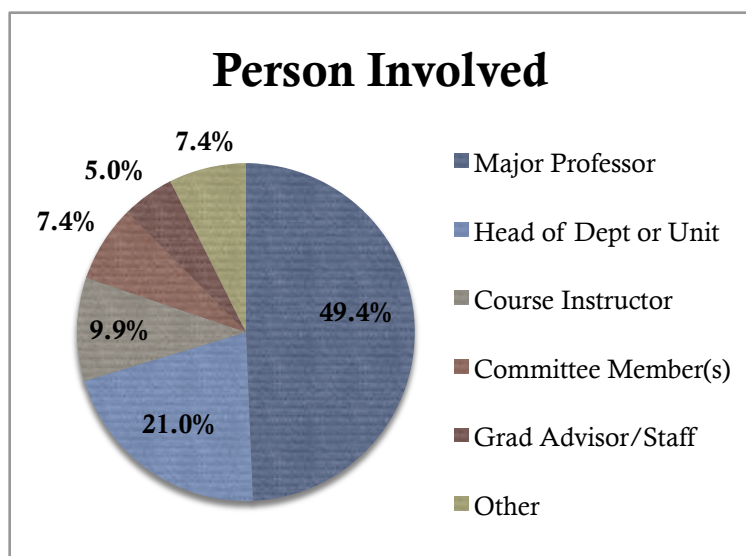


Figure 2. Primary person with whom students reported having an issue of concern. Data were available for 81 of the 92 visitors.

(Figure 2). The top issues of concern that graduate students report having with their major professor were those related to dissertation/masters requirements, other graduation requirements, or unfair treatment (which was usually embedded within what students perceived as a difficult relationship). The individual with whom graduate students reported the next greatest frequency of issues of concern was the head of their department or academic unit. This reflects the fact that many formal decisions about the student relay through the department head. Most of the head-related concerns involved academic probation, suspension, or dismissal.

- The issue of concern that graduate students were most likely to report was perceived unfair treatment (Figure 3), which typically occurred within the context of their major professor. Students also frequently discussed concerns related to (a) a potential change of committee chair, committee member, or department, (b) academic probation, suspension, or dismissal, (c) dissertation or thesis requirements, and (d) degree requirements.

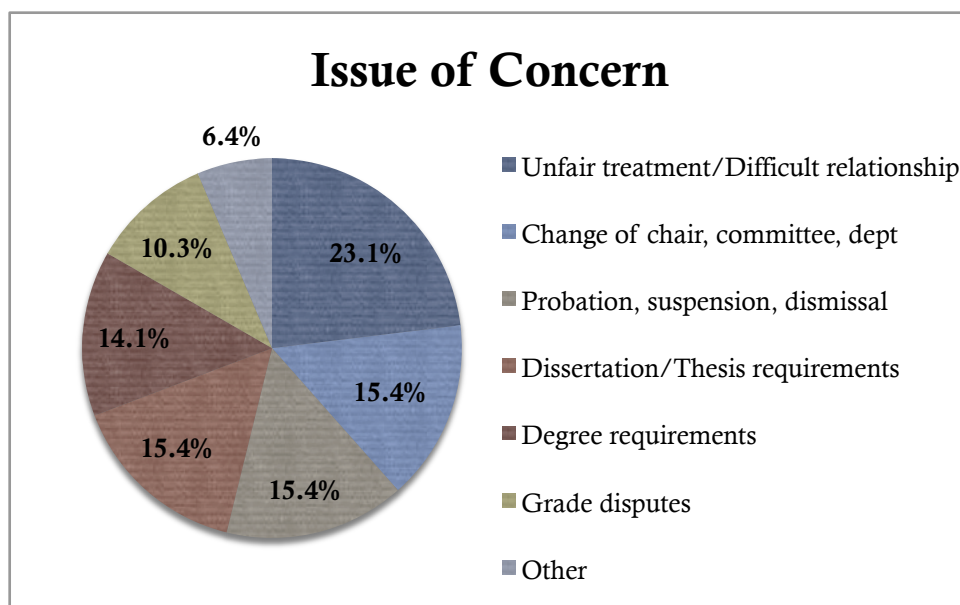


Figure 3. Issue of concern students reported. Data were available for 78 of the 92 visitors.

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- The types of concerns that graduate students brought to the graduate student Ombuds Officer differed by degree objective. The non-thesis master's students ($n = 15$) discussed grade disputes, degree requirements, perceived unfair treatment, and change of committee chair, committee member(s), or department (Figure 4a); thesis master's students ($n = 18$) most frequently discussed thesis requirements, degree requirements, and perceived unfair treatment (Figure 4b). In contrast, the issues most commonly discussed by doctoral students ($n = 40$) include unfair treatment, change of committee chair, committee member, or department, and academic probation, suspension, or dismissal (Figure 4c). The unique demands of each degree objective generate unique concerns for the three groups.

Masters (non-thesis)

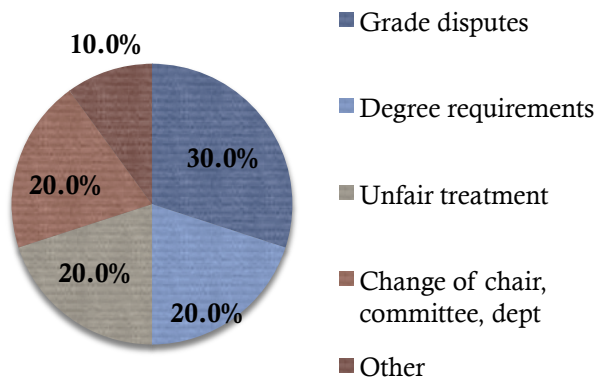


Figure 4a.

Masters (thesis)

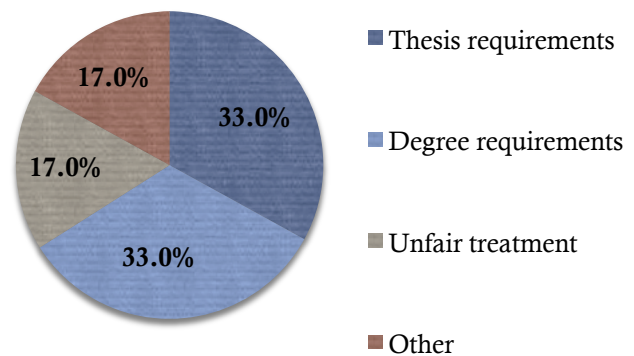


Figure 4b.

Doctorate

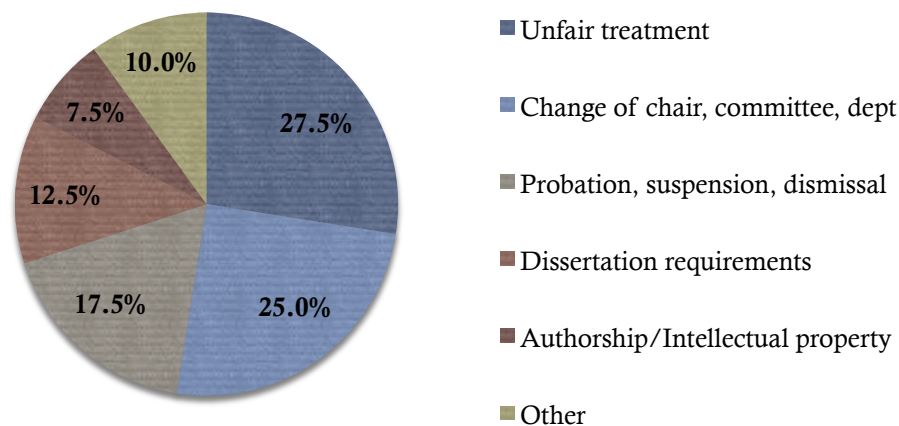
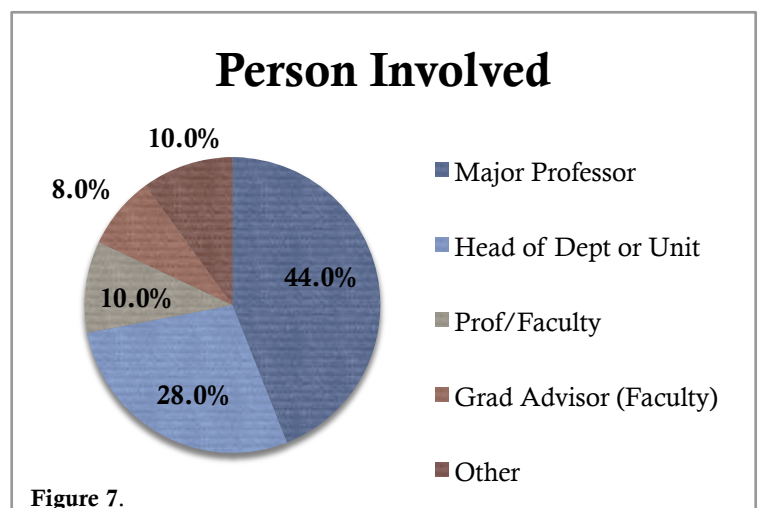
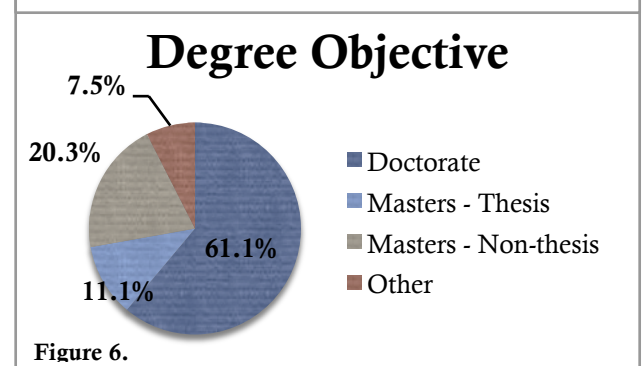
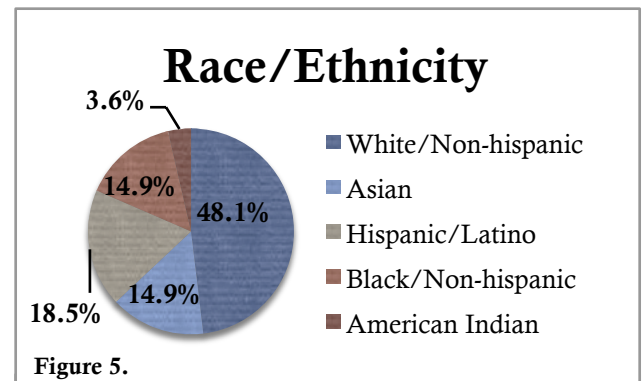


Figure 4c.

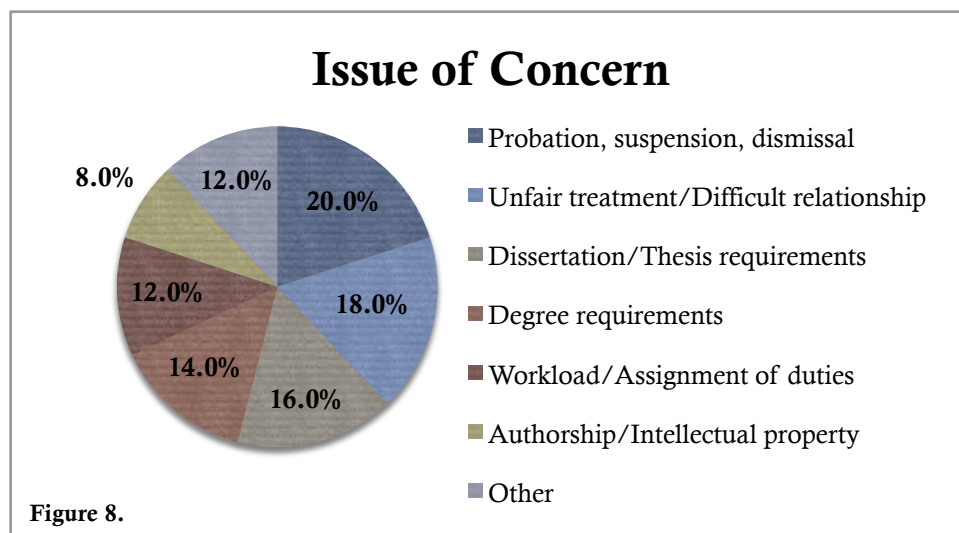
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Academic Year 2014-2015

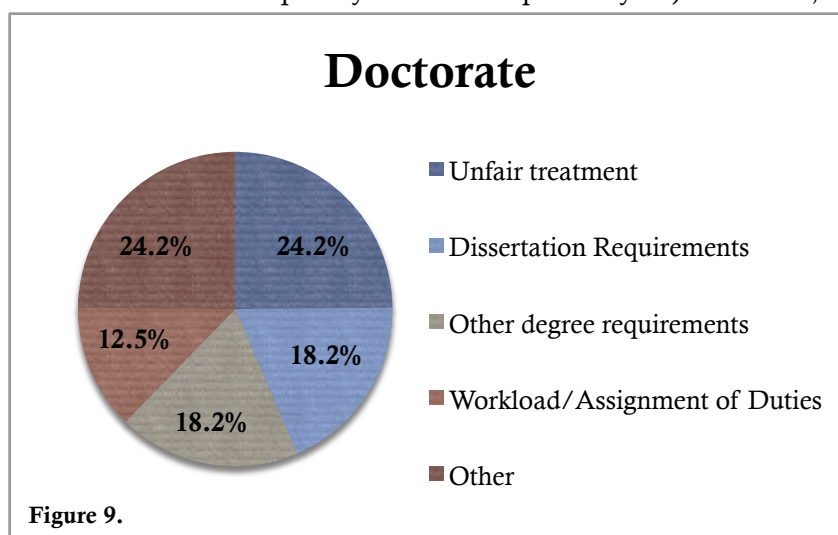
- Over this one-year period, OGAPS recorded 54 new visits, a 17% increase in the number of new visitors seeking services from the previous two years. The most likely explanation for the change is increased visibility of our services (see *Education and Prevention*). As graduate students become more aware of the services available, increased numbers of visitors results.
- Visitor demographics are available for AY 2014-2015. Of the 50 graduate student visitors (one was a previous student and three were faculty members), 24 were female and 26 male. Of the 50 graduate student visitors, 23 were international students. The race/ethnicities of the remaining 27 graduate students appear in Figure 5.
- This academic year we saw an increase in the percentage of doctoral student visitors as compared to master's students (Figure 6). We also saw a greater proportion of non-thesis over thesis masters students.
- See Figures 7 and 8, respectively, for data on the individual with whom students reported having an issue of concern, and the associated type of concern. Data include all graduate student visitors ($n = 50$). The new case management system included a slightly different approach to data coding, which may have contributed to what appears as slightly different outcomes from the previous two years. For example, this year a professor or faculty member (other than the student's major professor) surfaced as the third most frequently involved person. In previous years the third most frequently involved person was "course instructor". We replaced "course instructor" with "professor or faculty" to encompass a larger group of individuals with whom students had an evaluative relationship.



- Interestingly, the most frequently discussed issue of concern this year (Figure 8) was probation, suspension, or dismissal; in previous years unfair treatment/difficult relationship was the most frequently discussed topic and probation, suspension, dismissal was the third most frequently discussed topic. Also note that whereas change of chair, committee member, or department was the second most frequently discussed issue of concern in previous years, this year it did not emerge as a frequently discussed issue of concern. Possibly the unfair treatment/difficult relationship is often discussed along with a potential change of committee chair, and in previous years this was coded as a change of chair whereas in the current year it was coded as unfair treatment.



- Because of the relatively small number of master's thesis ($n = 10$) and master's non-thesis ($n = 6$) graduate student visitors, we will not report the breakdown of concerns for those two groups for AY 2014-2015. However, we do report (Figure 9) a breakdown of the concerns for doctoral students only ($n = 33$). Perceived unfair treatment, typically within the context of their major professor, remained the most frequently discussed topic by doctoral students. Dissertation requirements also emerged as a frequently discussed topic (fourth most frequently discussed topic in previous years and second most frequently discussed topic this year). However, other frequently discussed topics changed. In previous years change of chair, committee, or department and probation, suspension, or dismissal were frequently discussed; this year other degree requirements and workload/assignment of duties were frequently discussed. Workload issues typically included unclear or differing expectations for research assistant and teaching assistant assignments.



Education and Prevention

Workshops

- Good mentoring represents an important element to graduate student success. We also see from our statistics that mentor-mentee relationships sometimes break down. To facilitate healthy mentoring partnerships, and hopefully prevent some of the relationship difficulties that graduate students and their faculty mentors experience, we collaborated with the Center for Teaching Excellence and the Council of Graduate and Professional Students to offer two workshops to graduate students on mentoring relationships. These workshops were **Strategies for Building and Maintaining a Mentoring Partnership I (STEM fields)** and **Strategies for Building and Maintaining a Mentoring Partnership II (non-STEM fields)**. In addition, we offered a workshop, in collaboration with University Libraries, titled **Intellectual Property: Who owns my project?**
- This year we will offer two mentoring workshops. One workshop, **Mentoring Graduate Students and Post-doctoral Scholars**, planned for January 29th, 2016 targets faculty and is organized in collaboration with the Dean of Faculties and Center for Teaching Excellence (CTE). Another workshop, **Strategies for Building and Maintaining a Mentoring Partnership**, planned for February 18, 2016 targets graduate students and is organized in collaboration with CTE and the Graduate and Professional Student Council.

Outreach

- The graduate student Ombuds Officer spoke to several groups, upon request, about ombuds services offered by the Office of Graduate and Professional Studies. The sessions also included information about informal and formal grievance procedures available to students.
- To arrange an Ombuds Officer to speak to your group, or if you are faculty, staff, or administrator and would like a private conversation about ombuds matters, please email ombuds@tamu.edu or call 979-845-3631 and ask to speak to the Ombuds Officer.

Faculty-student mentoring compact

- The Faculty-Student Agreement Task force convened in September of 2014 and developed a TAMU Compact Between Graduate Students and Their Supervising Faculty to be used as a tool to encourage regular communication, facilitate difficult conversations, and clarify expectations of both parties. The compact can be found on the OGAPS website.
- Additional resources to help graduate students find the support they need to navigate challenges encountered in both academic and personal life also can be found on the OGAPS website.