

Texas A&M University

Graduate Student Ombuds Services

Annual Report

AY 2016-2017

A safe place to talk and explore solutions

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Introduction

Role of the Ombuds Officer

- The primary role of Graduate Student Ombuds Services is to provide a safe, confidential, informal setting where students can talk about concerns, identify potential solutions, and plan a path forward. Students bring a variety of concerns to the Ombuds Officer, from how to have a difficult conversation with a faculty mentor, to navigating the complexities of a research group, to identifying informal and formal grievance procedures. The Ombuds Officer can also refer students to other helpful resources.
- The Ombuds Officer welcomes conversations with faculty, staff, and administrators to discuss challenging situations and to help clarify university procedures and policies as they relate to graduate students.
- In addition to helping students directly, the Ombuds Officer can communicate patterns of concerns to university administration, maintaining student confidentiality, with the goal of affecting positive change.

Meeting with an Ombuds Officer

- You can make an appointment with the Ombuds Officer through the Office of Graduate and Professional Studies at ombuds@tamu.edu. Face-to-face meetings are preferred, but we also conduct phone and skype meetings.
- In some cases, a solution is found after one visit. More complicated cases often involve multiple visits.

Standards of Practice

The **Code of Ethics** and **Standards of Practice** of the International Ombudsman Association (IOA) guide our practice of ombudsmen. The IOA Code of Ethics informs the types of activities in which an ombuds officer can and cannot engage. For example,

- 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.
 - ✓ Help students identify options for resolving disagreements and conflicts with colleagues, faculty, staff, and advisors.
 - ✓ 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.
 - ✓ Participate in formal grievance procedures.
 - ✓ Conduct formal investigations or provide legal advice.

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
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Who Used the Ombuds Officer

Background

- When a visitor comes to the office with an issue(s) of concern this is considered a case. If a visitor is seen a number of times about the same issue(s), this is recorded as a single case. If this same individual visits with a different set of issue(s) of concern, this is considered a new case. Finally, each case can include multiple individuals. For example, two graduate students visiting together about the same issue would be considered a single case.
- The following data are reported for the last three academic years: (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, the primary person involved, and the primary concern, was included in data reports.
- We have also coded concerns using the International Ombudsman Association (IOA) Reporting Categories (See Appendix A). Up to four concerns were coded for each case. Hence, the number of issues raised during the year is greater than the number of cases. This approach allows us to compare data with other institutions and organizations that use this standardized reporting protocol.
- These are reports from the perspective of the student.

Visitor Statistics

- The Ombuds Officer recorded 55, 79, and 90 new cases in academic years 2014-2015, 2015-2016, and 2016-2017, respectively. Information about visitor type is reported in Figure 1.
- Figures 2 to 4 display degree objective, gender, and race/ethnicity of the graduate student visitors.
- Figures 5 and 6 display distribution of student concerns.

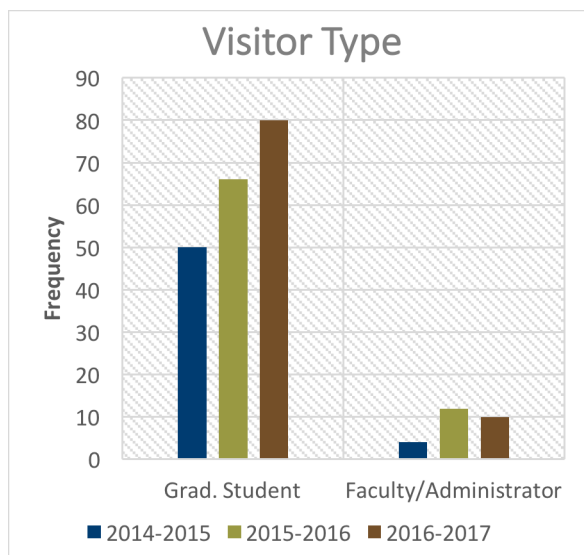


Figure 1. Type of visitors who approached Ombuds.

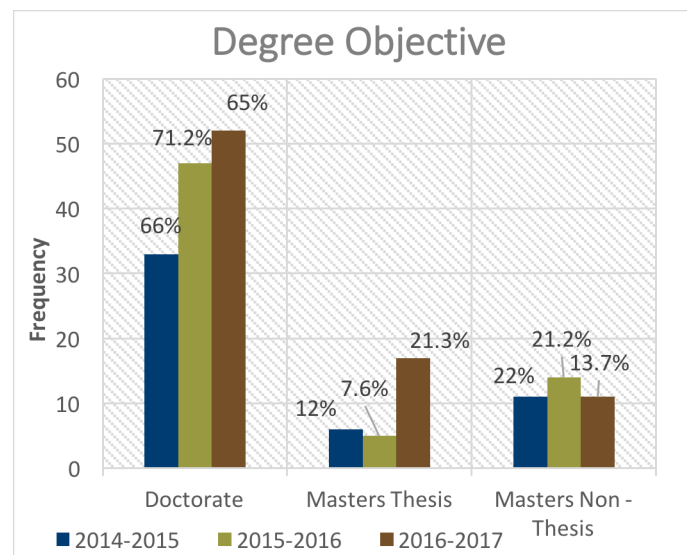


Figure 2. Degree objective of students who visited Ombuds.

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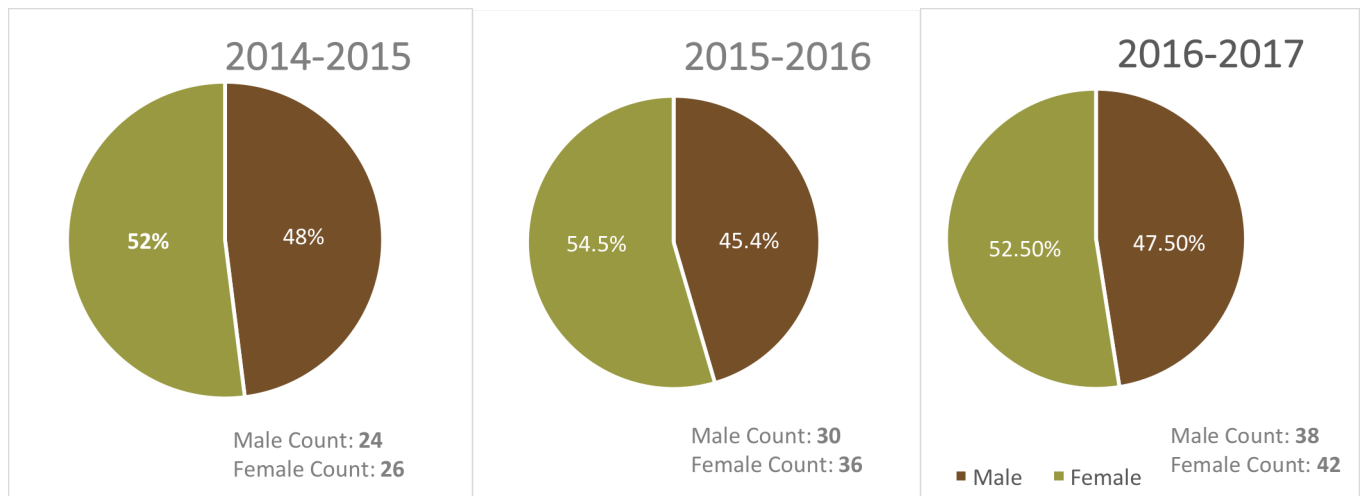


Figure 3. Gender of students who visited Ombuds.

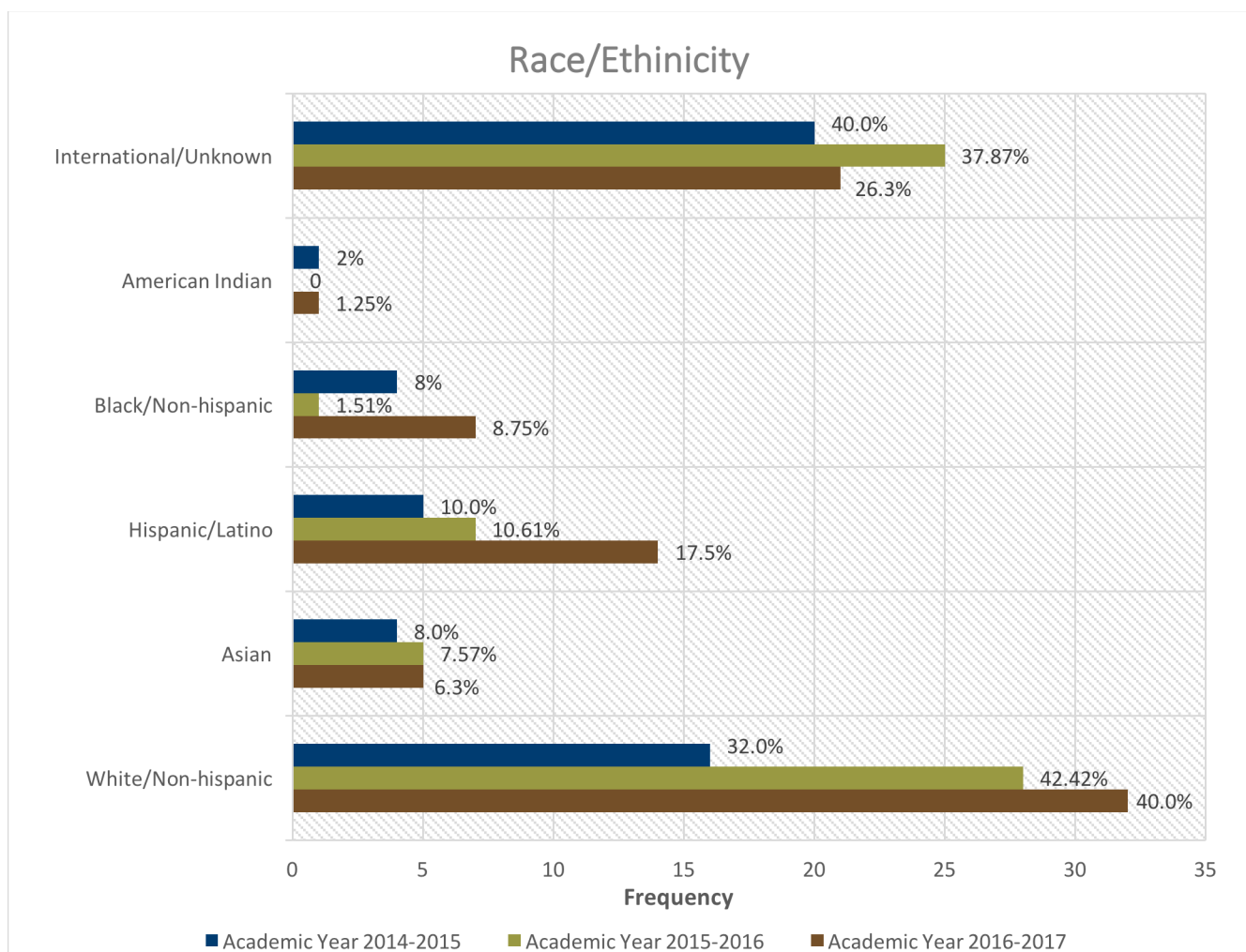


Figure 4. Race/Ethnicity of students who visited Ombuds. Percentages are of the total number of student visitors for that year.

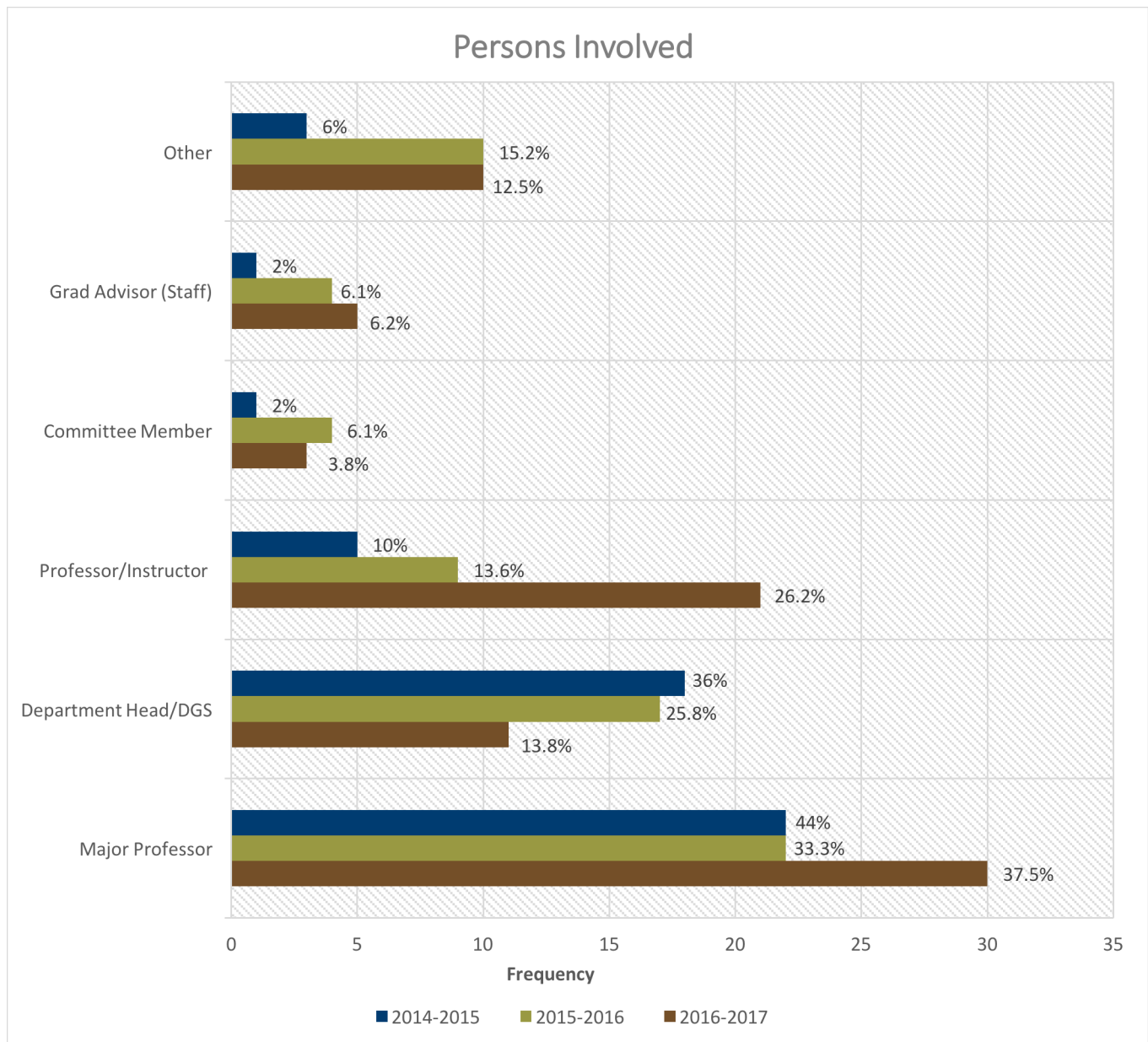


Figure 5. Individual with whom students reported an issue of concern. Percentages are of the total number of persons involved for that year.

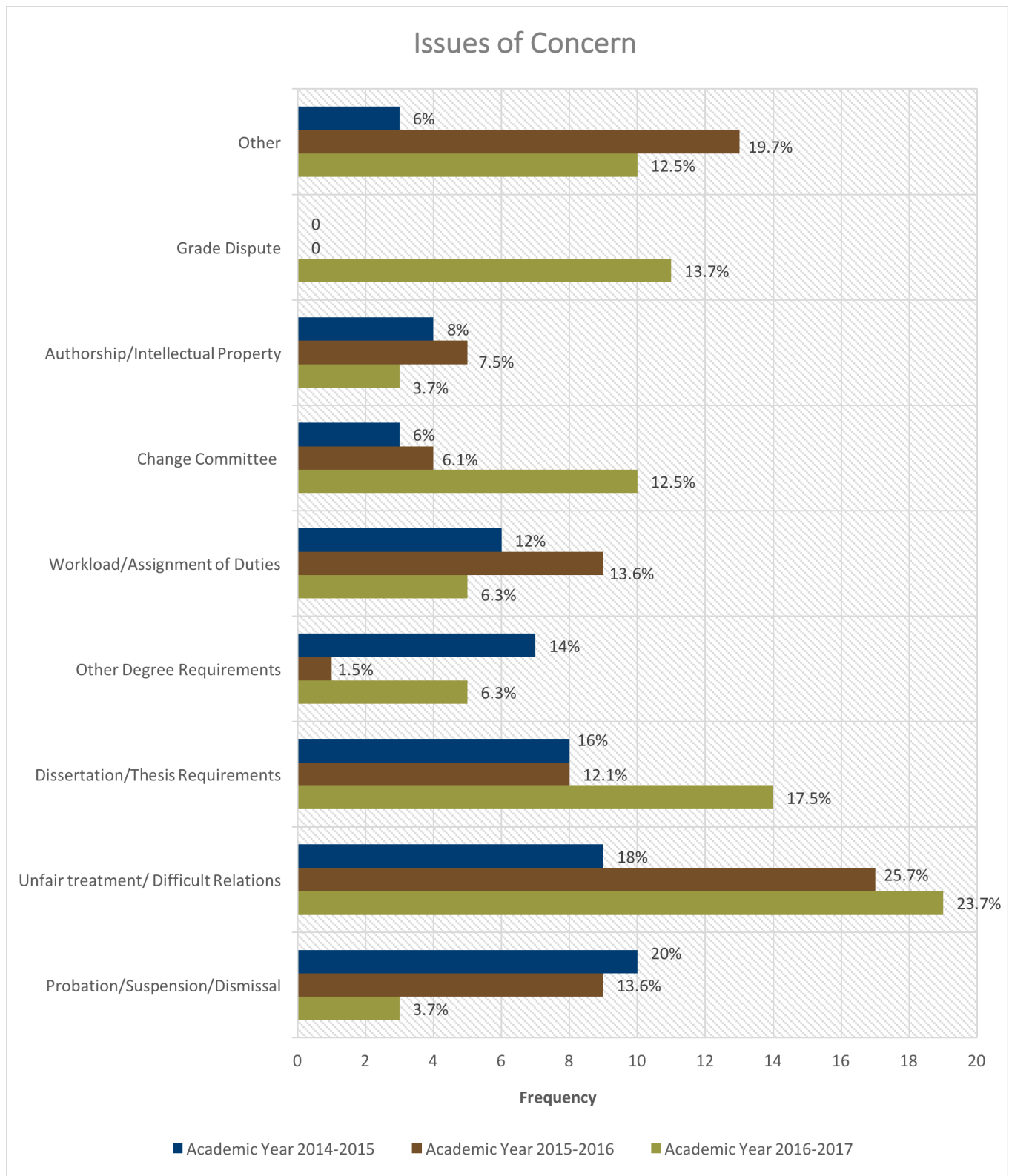


Figure 6: Issues of concern reported by students. Percentages are of the total number of concerns reported for that year.

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- The concerns graduate students reported fell into seven of the nine Uniform Reporting Categories of the International Ombudsman Association (Appendix A). The most frequently reported concerns were those that related to Evaluative Relationships. Within Evaluative Relationships, 2.e and 2.m were dominant, followed by 2.b, 2.g, and 2.j. The next most frequently held concerns were those related to Career Progression and Development. Within this category, two subcategories were dominant: 4.e. (e.g., slower than desired progress towards degree completion) and 4.h (e.g., questions about processes related to probation or dismissal). Within the category of Values, Ethics, Standards, most concerns focused authorship and intellectual property.

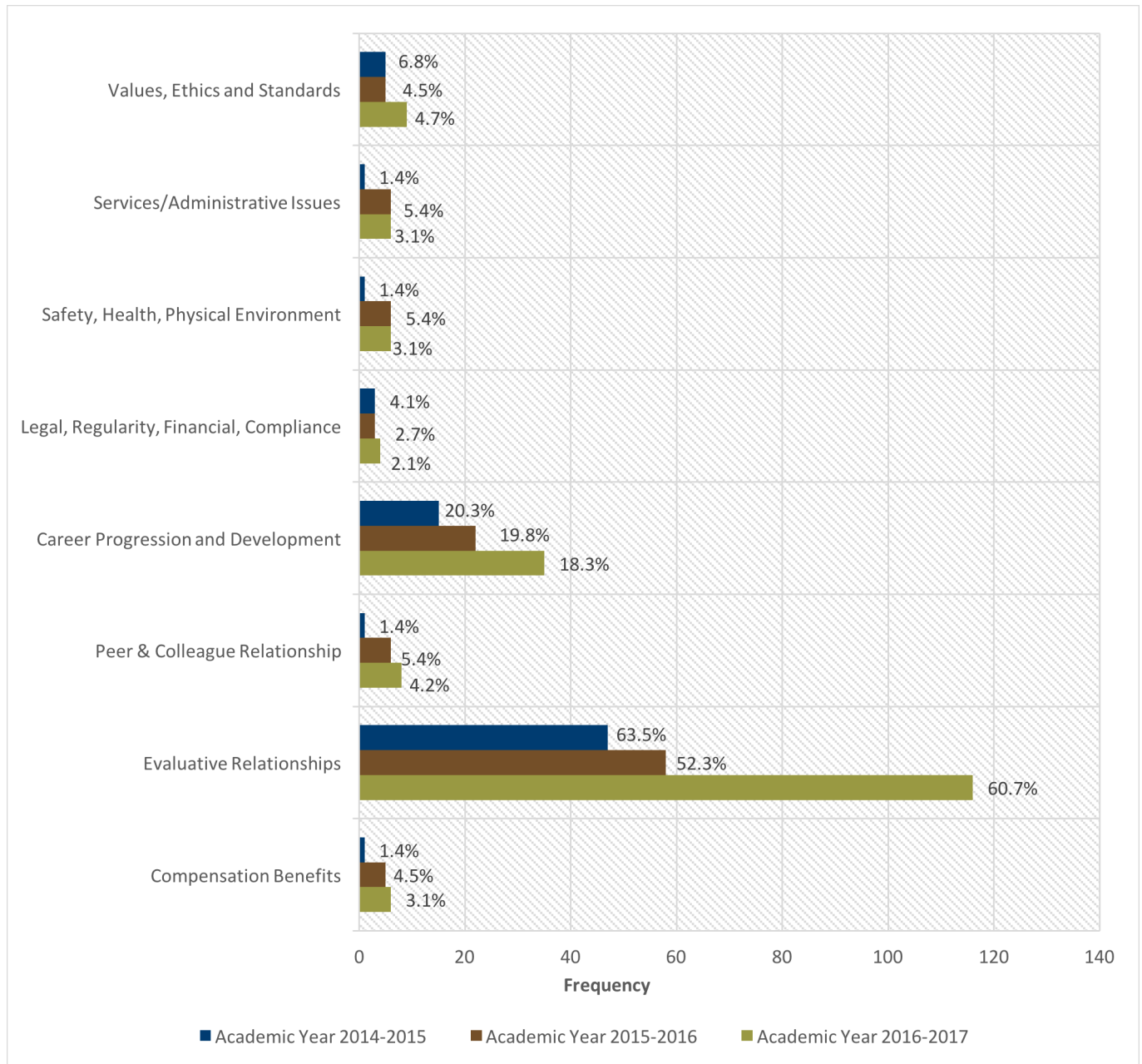


Figure 7. Student concerns coded on the basis of IOA Uniform Reporting Categories.

Moving Forward

Ombuds – related activities

- **Mentoring:** Effective mentoring is an important determinate of graduate student success. As seen in the data, the majority of graduate student concerns are associated with the evaluative nature of the faculty-student relationship. To facilitate healthy mentoring partnerships between graduate students and their faculty mentors, the Office of Graduate and Professional Studies offers mentoring workshops for graduate students. Additional resources, including a mentoring compact, can be found on the OGAPS website.
- **Individual Development Plans:** One way to help facilitate and track yearly progress is for graduate students to complete an Individual Development Plan (IDP) in collaboration with their faculty mentor. An IDP is a tool designed to help graduate students and postdoctoral scholars identify long-term career goals, devise a plan to meet those goals, and evaluate the implementation of that plan on a regular basis. An IDP template developed by the Texas A&M University Center for Teaching Excellence can be found on the OGAPS website. The American Association for the Advancement of Science has an IDP template and other helpful resources at <http://sciencecareers.org/>.
- **Outreach:** The Ombuds Officer regularly visits the Graduate and Professional Student Council, the Graduate Operations Committee, and attends Graduate Advisors Workshops. The Ombuds officer also speaks with other groups upon request. To arrange an Ombuds Officer to speak to your group email ombuds@tamu.edu or call (979)845-3631 and ask to speak to the Ombuds Officer.

Other Resources

- Offices of the **Dean of Student Life** offer support and assistance with a number of concerns, such as:
 - ✓ Harassment and discrimination
 - ✓ Sexual harassment and assault, dating violence, domestic violence, stalking and related retaliation
- Offices of the **Dean of Student Life** also offer a number of other services, such as:
 - ✓ Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender Resource Center
 - ✓ New Student & Family Programs
 - ✓ Off-Campus Student Services
 - ✓ Student Legal Services
 - ✓ Women's Resource Center
 - ✓ Counseling resources
- **Counseling Services** provide a variety of support services, such as:
 - ✓ Career and Personal Counseling
 - ✓ Crisis Intervention
 - ✓ Learning Disability and ADD/ADHD Screening
 - ✓ Stress Management and Biofeedback Services

Appendix A



INTERNATIONAL OMBUDSMAN ASSOCIATION Uniform Reporting Categories

VERSION 2
October 2007

1. Compensation & Benefits

Questions, concerns, issues or inquiries about the equity, appropriateness and competitiveness of employee compensation, benefits and other benefit programs.

- 1.a **Compensation** (rate of pay, salary amount, job salary classification/level)
- 1.b **Payroll** (administration of pay, check wrong or delayed)
- 1.c **Benefits** (decisions related to medical, dental, life, vacation/sick leave, education, worker's compensation insurance, etc.)
- 1.d **Retirement, Pension** (eligibility, calculation of amount, retirement pension benefits)
- 1.e **Other** (any other employee compensation or benefit not described by the above sub-categories)

2. Evaluative Relationships

Questions, concerns, issues or inquiries arising between people in evaluative relationships (i.e. supervisor-employee, faculty-student.)

- 2.a **Priorities, Values, Beliefs** (differences about what should be considered important – or most important – often rooted in ethical or moral beliefs)
- 2.b **Respect/Treatment** (demonstrations of inappropriate regard for people, not listening, rudeness, crudeness, etc.)
- 2.c **Trust/Integrity** (suspicion that others are not being honest, whether or to what extent one wishes to be honest, etc.)
- 2.d **Reputation** (possible impact of rumors and/or gossip about professional or personal matters)
- 2.e **Communication** (quality and/or quantity of communication)
- 2.f **Bullying, Mobbing** (abusive, threatening, and/or coercive behaviors)
- 2.g **Diversity-Related** (comments or behaviors perceived to be insensitive, offensive, or intolerant on the basis of an identity-related difference such as race, gender, nationality, sexual orientation)
- 2.h **Retaliation** (punitive behaviors for previous actions or comments, whistleblower)
- 2.i **Physical Violence** (actual or threats of bodily harm to another)
- 2.j **Assignments/Schedules** (appropriateness or fairness of tasks, expected volume of work)
- 2.k **Feedback** (feedback or recognition given, or responses to feedback received)
- 2.l **Consultation** (requests for help in dealing with issues between two or more individuals they supervise/teach or with other unusual situations in evaluative relationships)

2.m Performance Appraisal/Grading

(job/academic performance in formal or informal evaluation)

- 2.n **Departmental Climate** (prevailing behaviors, norms, or attitudes within a department for which supervisors or faculty have responsibility.)
- 2.o **Supervisory Effectiveness** (management of department or classroom, failure to address issues)
- 2.p **Insubordination** (refusal to do what is asked)
- 2.q **Discipline** (appropriateness, timeliness, requirements, alternatives, or options for responding)
- 2.r **Equity of Treatment** (favoritism, one or more individuals receive preferential treatment)
- 2.s **Other** (any other evaluative relationship not described by the above sub-categories)

3. Peer and Colleague Relationships

Questions, concerns, issues or inquiries involving peers or colleagues who do not have a supervisory-employee or student-professor relationship (e.g., two staff members within the same department or conflict involving members of a student organization.)

- 3.a **Priorities, Values, Beliefs** (differences about what should be considered important – or most important – often rooted in ethical or moral beliefs)
- 3.b **Respect/Treatment** (demonstrations of inappropriate regard for people, not listening, rudeness, crudeness, etc.)
- 3.c **Trust/Integrity** (suspicion that others are not being honest, whether or to what extent one wishes to be honest, etc.)
- 3.d **Reputation** (possible impact of rumors and/or gossip about professional or personal matters)
- 3.e **Communication** (quality and/or quantity of communication)
- 3.f **Bullying, Mobbing** (abusive, threatening, and/or coercive behaviors)
- 3.g **Diversity-Related** (comments or behaviors perceived to be insensitive, offensive, or intolerant on the basis of an identity-related difference such as race, gender, nationality, sexual orientation)
- 3.h **Retaliation** (punitive behaviors for previous actions or comments, whistleblower)
- 3.i **Physical Violence** (actual or threats of bodily harm to another)
- 3.j **Other** (any peer or colleague relationship not described by the above sub-categories)

4. Career Progression and Development

Questions, concerns, issues or inquiries about administrative processes and decisions regarding entering and leaving a job, what it entails, (i.e., recruitment, nature and place of assignment, job security, and separation.)

- 4.a **Job Application/Selection and Recruitment Processes** (recruitment and selection processes, facilitation of job applications, short-listing and criteria for selection, disputed decisions linked to recruitment and selection)
- 4.b **Job Classification and Description** (changes or disagreements over requirements of assignment, appropriate tasks)
- 4.c **Involuntary Transfer/Change of Assignment** (notice, selection and special dislocation rights/benefits, removal from prior duties, unrequested change of work tasks)
- 4.d **Tenure/Position Security/Ambiguity** (security of position or contract, provision of secure contractual categories)
- 4.e **Career Progression** (promotion, reappointment, or tenure)
- 4.f **Rotation and Duration of Assignment** (non-completion or over-extension of assignments in specific settings/countries, lack of access or involuntary transfer to specific roles/assignments, requests for transfer to other places/duties/roles)
- 4.g **Resignation** (concerns about whether or how to voluntarily terminate employment or how such a decision might be communicated appropriately)
- 4.h **Termination/Non-Renewal** (end of contract, non-renewal of contract, disputed permanent separation from organization)
- 4.i **Re-employment of Former or Retired Staff** (loss of competitive advantages associated with re-hiring retired staff, favoritism)
- 4.j **Position Elimination** (elimination or abolition of an individual's position)
- 4.k **Career Development, Coaching, Mentoring** (classroom, on-the-job, and varied assignments as training and developmental opportunities)
- 4.l **Other** (any other issues linked to recruitment, assignment, job security or separation not described by the above sub-categories)

5. Legal, Regulatory, Financial and Compliance

Questions, concerns, issues or inquiries that may create a legal risk (financial, sanction etc.) for the organization or its members if not addressed, including issues related to waste, fraud or abuse.

- 5.a Criminal Activity** (threats or crimes planned, observed, or experienced, fraud)
- 5.b Business and Financial Practices** (inappropriate actions that abuse or waste organizational finances, facilities or equipment)
- 5.c Harassment** (unwelcome physical, verbal, written, e-mail, audio, video psychological or sexual conduct that creates a hostile or intimidating environment)
- 5.d Discrimination** (different treatment compared with others or exclusion from some benefit on the basis of, for example, gender, race, age, national origin, religion, etc.[being part of an Equal Employment Opportunity protected category – applies in the U.S.])
- 5.e Disability, Temporary or Permanent, Reasonable Accommodation** (extra time on exams, provision of assistive technology, interpreters, or Braille materials including questions on policies, etc. for people with disabilities)
- 5.f Accessibility** (removal of physical barriers, providing ramps, elevators, etc.)
- 5.g Intellectual Property Rights** (e.g., copyright and patent infringement)
- 5.h Privacy and Security of Information** (release or access to individual or organizational private or confidential information)
- 5.i Property Damage** (personal property damage, liabilities)
- 5.j Other** (any other legal, financial and compliance issue not described by the above sub-categories)
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6. Safety, Health, and Physical Environment

Questions, concerns, issues or inquiries about Safety, Health and Infrastructure-related issues.

- 6.a Safety** (physical safety, injury, medical evacuation, meeting federal and state requirements for training and equipment)
- 6.b Physical Working/Living Conditions** (temperature, odors, noise, available space, lighting, etc)
- 6.c Ergonomics** (proper set-up of workstation affecting physical functioning)
- 6.d Cleanliness** (sanitary conditions and facilities to prevent the spread of disease)
- 6.e Security** (adequate lighting in parking lots, metal detectors, guards, limited access to building by outsiders, anti-terrorists measures (not for classifying "compromise of classified or top secret" information)

- 6.f Telework/Flexplace** (ability to work from home or other location because of business or personal need, e.g., in case of man-made or natural emergency)
- 6.g Safety Equipment** (access to/use of safety equipment as well as access to or use of safety equipment, e.g., fire extinguisher)
- 6.h Environmental Policies** (policies not being followed, being unfair ineffective, cumbersome)
- 6.i Work Related Stress and Work-Life Balance** (Post-Traumatic Stress, Critical Incident Response, internal/external stress, e.g. divorce, shooting, caring for sick, injured)
- 6.j Other** (any safety, health, or physical environment issue not described by the above sub-categories)
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7. Services/Administrative Issues

Questions, concerns, issues or inquiries about services or administrative offices including from external parties.

- 7.a Quality of Services** (how well services were provided, accuracy or thoroughness of information, competence, etc.)
- 7.b Responsiveness/Timeliness** (time involved in getting a response or return call or about the time for a complete response to be provided)
- 7.c Administrative Decisions and Interpretation/Application of Rules** (impact of non-disciplinary decisions, decisions about requests for administrative and academic services, e.g., exceptions to policy deadlines or limits, refund requests, appeals of library or parking fines, application for financial aid, etc.)
- 7.d Behavior of Service Provider(s)** (how an administrator or staff member spoke to or dealt with a constituent, customer, or client, e.g., rude, inattentive, or impatient)
- 7.e Other** (any services or administrative issue not described by the above sub-categories)
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8. Organizational, Strategic, and Mission Related

Questions, concerns, issues or inquiries that relate to the whole or some part of an organization.

- 8.a Strategic and Mission-Related/ Strategic and Technical Management** (principles, decisions and actions related to where and how the organization is moving)
- 8.b Leadership and Management** (quality/capacity of management and/or management/leadership decisions, suggested training, reassignments and reorganizations)

- 8.c Use of Positional Power/Authority** (lack or abuse of power provided by individual's position)
- 8.d Communication** (content, style, timing, effects and amount of organizational and leader's communication, quality of communication about strategic issues)
- 8.e Restructuring and Relocation** (issues related to broad scope planned or actual restructuring and/or relocation affecting the whole or major divisions of an organization, e.g. downsizing, off shoring, outsourcing)
- 8.f Organizational Climate** (issues related to organizational morale and/or capacity for functioning)
- 8.g Change Management** (making, responding or adapting to organizational changes, quality of leadership in facilitating organizational change)
- 8.h Priority Setting and/or Funding** (disputes about setting organizational/departamental priorities and/or allocation of funding within programs)
- 8.i Data, Methodology, Interpretation of Results** (scientific disputes about the conduct, outcomes and interpretation of studies and resulting data for policy)
- 8.j Interdepartment/Interorganization Work/Territory** (disputes about which department/organization should be doing what/taking the lead)
- 8.k Other** (any organizational issue not described by the above sub-categories)
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9. Values, Ethics, and Standards

Questions, concerns, issues or inquiries about the fairness of organizational values, ethics, and/or standards, the application of related policies and/or procedures, or the need for creation or revision of policies, and/or standards.

- 9.a Standards of Conduct** (fairness, applicability or lack of behavioral guidelines and/or Codes of Conduct, e.g., Academic Honesty, plagiarism, Code of Conduct, conflict of interest)
- 9.b Values and Culture** (questions, concerns or issues about the values or culture of the organization)
- 9.c Scientific Conduct/Integrity** (scientific or research misconduct or misdemeanors, e.g., authorship; falsification of results)
- 9.d Policies and Procedures NOT Covered in Broad Categories 1 thru 8** (fairness or lack of policy or the application of the policy, policy not followed, or needs revision, e.g., appropriate dress, use of internet or cell phones)
- 9.e Other** (Other policy, procedure, ethics or standards issues not described in the above sub-categories)
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