

Texas A&M University

Graduate Student Ombuds Services
Annual Report
2021-2022

Introduction

Role of the Ombuds Officer

The Ombuds Officer advocates for the fair and transparent 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 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.

Mandatory Reporter

The Ombuds Office values and protects the privacy and identity of students seeking assistance. Confidential communication is not disclosed unless required by state law. In addition, per Texas A&M System Regulation 08.01.01, Ombuds Officers are Mandatory Reporters and are required to report any alleged sexual harassment, sexual assault, dating violence, stalking, discrimination, or any other prohibited conduct committed by or against a person who was a student or employee at the time of the incident. Ombuds Officers are also obligated to report discrimination based on a protected status.

Meeting with an Ombuds Officer

Individuals can make an appointment with the Ombuds Officer through the Graduate School at ombuds@tamu.edu or 979.845.3631. In person, phone, and Zoom appointments are available. In some cases, the visitor and the Ombuds Officer identify a solution after one visit. More complicated cases often involve multiple visits.

Potential Topics of Conversation

Visitors discuss several topics with the Ombuds Officer, including but not limited to:

- Grade appeal process.
- Conflicts between graduate students and their faculty advisors and/or dissertation committee.
- Concerns about inequities in work expectations and/or funding opportunities.
- Interpersonal conflicts, lab politics, and problems with workplace climate.
- Advice on how to have difficult conversations.
- Concerns about procedural fairness or due process.
- Authorship disputes.

Texas A&M University

- Disagreements with or misunderstandings of university policy/procedure.
- Cultural conflicts.
- Concerns about unethical or inappropriate behavior.

Ombuds 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 visitors reported concerns with more than a single person or issue. In these cases, we included the primary person involved and the primary concern. We present data for 2021-2022.

Visitor Statistics (2021 – 2022)

For 2021-2022, Ombuds Officers met with 74 visitors: 23 in the Fall, 34 in the Spring, and 17 in the Summer. This is a 10% decrease in visits from 2020-2021. Of the 74 visits, 91% of visits were conducted over zoom with two visits completed in person and four by phone. The Ombuds office had an average of 1.22 contacts per visitor ($SD = .57$) and spent an average of 74.53 minutes on each case ($SD = 52.57$). When compared to the previous year, while the number of visits decreased, the time spent with each visitor increased.

Demographics

The majority of all visitors to the Ombuds office were women and Non-Hispanic White students. For student visitors, the majority were women, non-Hispanic White and international students. Exhibit 1 provides detailed demographic information of the visitors, as well as the corresponding proportion of graduate students at the university during Fall 2022.

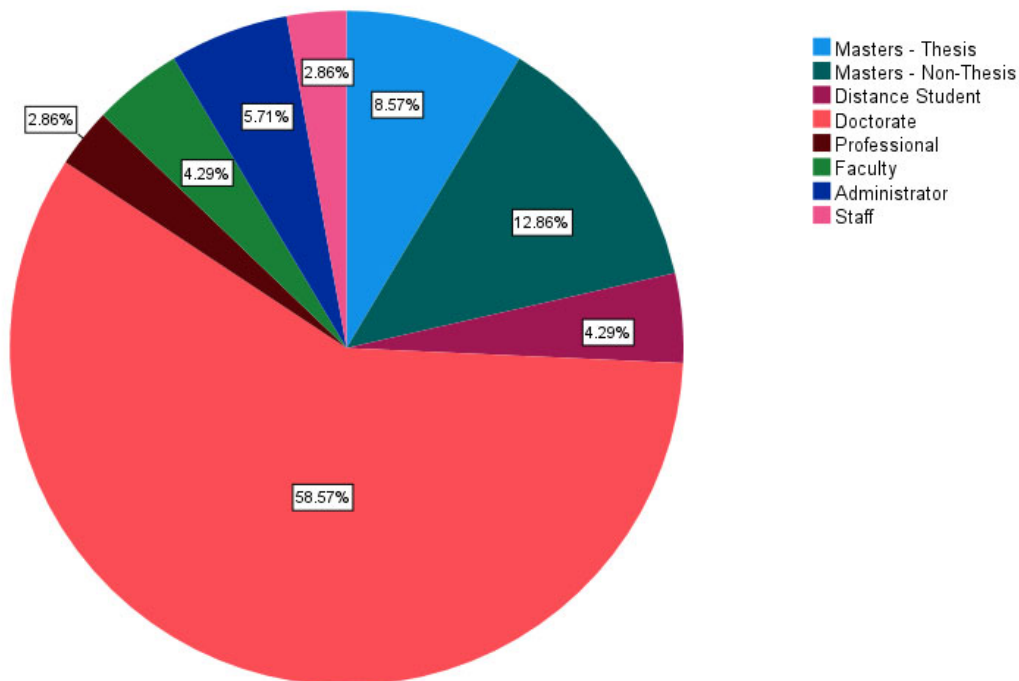
Exhibit 1. Visitor Demographics

	All Visitors	Student Visitors	All TAMU Students
Gender			
Women	62.9%	63.9%	47.2%
Men	37.1%	36.1%	52.8%
Ethnicity			
American Indian/Alaska Native	1.3%	0%	.2%
Asian/Asian American	21.7%	25.0%	7.6%
Black, Non-Hispanic	7.2%	6.7%	4.2%
Hispanic/Latino	13%	15.0%	13.5%
International	36.4%	40.0%	29.1%
White, Non-Hispanic	44.9%	40.0%	38.7%

Visitor Role

As seen in Exhibit 2, the majority of the visitors were doctoral students followed by master's students.

Exhibit 2. Visitor Status at the University



Professional students are students enrolled professional degree programs (JD, MD, DDS, DVM, PharmD).

Distance students are enrolled in a master's distance education program. The university defines a distance education program as "a program in which a student may complete more than one-half of the semester credit hours required for the program through a combination of distance education courses." (Source: <https://distance.tamu.edu/>)

Visitor College Affiliation

Exhibit 3 provides information about visitors' college affiliations. As a point of comparison, the same exhibit includes the relative proportion of students from that college in Fall 2022.

A majority of Ombuds Office visitors came from three colleges/schools: Arts & Sciences, Engineering, and Agriculture and Life Sciences.

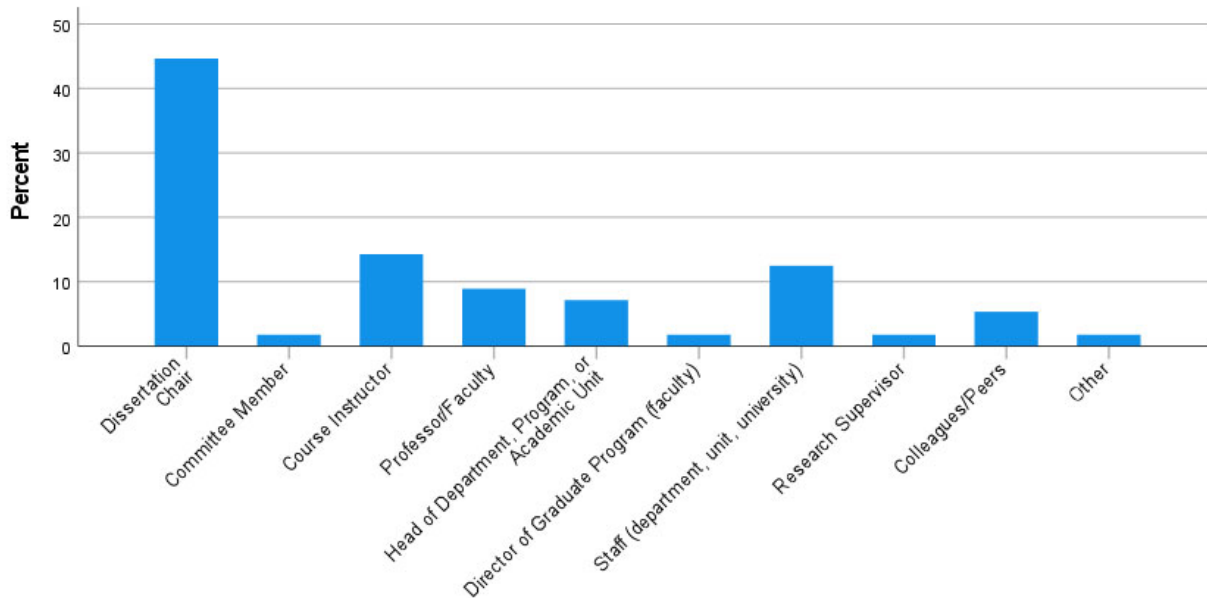
Exhibit 3. Visitors by College/School

College/School	All Visitors	Student Visitors	All TAMU Students
Agriculture and Life Sciences	19.4%	18.3%	6.9%
Bush School	3%	3.3%	3.7%
Mays Business School	3%	3.3%	7.8%
Education and Human Development	7.5%	6.7%	8.6%
Engineering	22.4%	23.3%	26.6%
Arts & Sciences	29.8%	31.7%	13.5%
Performance, Visualization, & Fine Arts	0%	0%	0.5%
Architecture	6%	6.7%	2.8%
Law	0%	0%	7.9%
Public Health	1.5%	3.3%	2.7%
Engineering Medicine	0%	--	--
Veterinary Medicine and Biological Sciences	1.5%	1.7%	5.5%
Medicine	1.5%	0%	5.4%
Dentistry	0%	0%	2.6%
Nursing	0%	0%	0.90%
TAMU-Galveston	1.5%	1.7%	0.90%

Nature of the Visit

Approximately 44% of individuals who visited the Ombuds Office expressed concerns with their dissertation chair. This was followed by conflict with course instructors and university staff (see Exhibit 4).¹

Exhibit 4. Primary Source of Concern



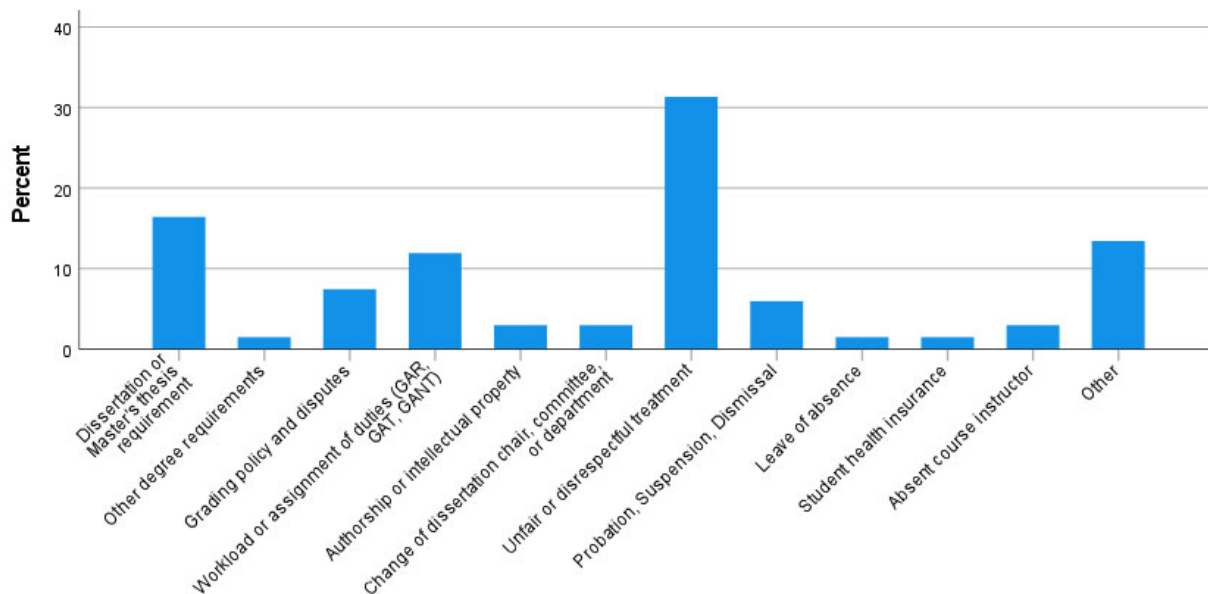
Approximately 31% of visitors shared concerns about receiving unfair or disrespectful treatment (see Exhibit 5). Disrespectful and/or unfair treatment concerns involved faculty, primarily dissertation chairs. Visitors provided examples such as advisors not clarifying dissertation defense requirements, not allowing student to consult with committee members, and requiring students to work during university staff holidays

Approximately 16.4% sought help clarifying policies on dissertation requirements. Visitors often noted their faculty advisor/dissertation chair often changed dissertation defense requirements. This led to students having to postpone graduation and turn down job offers. Many visitors sought assistance with graduate assistantship workload. Graduate Assistants noted that they often worked over 20 hours a week, sometimes working 12-hour days. The Ombuds office worked with Employee Relations in addressing these issues.

¹ Other = individuals not affiliated with the university; Dissertation Chair = faculty advisor or major professor; Professor/Faculty = a faculty member not the student's instructor or a member of student's graduate 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).

For the Other category (13.4%), the nature of the visit was primarily from administrators and staff seeking consultation on a graduate student issues. Consultation included guidance on grade appeals and annual review of student progress.

Exhibit 5. Nature of Visit



Mandatory Reporting

Following Texas A&M System Regulation 08.01.01, the Ombuds office submits reports to the Department of Civil Rights & Equity Investigations (CREI) if visitors provide information about alleged discrimination, harassment, or related retaliation. For 2021-2022, 8 reports were submitted to the CREI.

Nature of Visit by Gender, Ethnicity, and College

Of all female visitors to the Ombuds Office, 32.1% expressed conflict with their dissertation chair followed by conflict with a course instructor (8.9%). Male visitors primarily reported conflict with their dissertation chair (12.5%) and university staff (7.1%).

For White (20%), Latino (7.3%), Asian American (10.9%), and international students (20.4%), conflict with their dissertation chair was the primary reason for seeking Ombuds assistance. For Black students, the primary source of conflict was with a professor who was not their course instructor.

Both men's and women's top concern presented to the Ombuds Office was receiving unfair and disrespectful treatment (22.4% and 9%, respectively). The second top concern for women was graduate assistantship workload (10.4%) and dissertation requirements for men (7.5%).

Issues of receiving unfair and disrespectful treatment were the top concerns brought by students in the following schools/colleges: Architecture (3.1%), Agriculture and Life Sciences (6.3%), Arts & Sciences (14.1%), and Education and Human Development (3.1%). For visitors from the College of Engineering, the primary issues of dissertation requirements and unfair and disrespectful treatment were tied at 6.3% each.