

Texas A&M University

Graduate Student Ombuds Services

Annual Report

FY 2019-2020

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 Zoom appointments are available. In some cases, the visitor and Ombuds Officer identify a solution after one visit. More complicated cases often involve multiple visits.

As of Mid-March 2020, in response to COVID-19 and following university guidelines, appointments were conducted on Zoom or by phone. Virtual appointments continued through FY20.

Potential Topics of Conversation

Visitors discuss several 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 ombudsmen. 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

NEUTRAL
AND
IMPARTIAL

INFORMAL

INDEPENDENCE

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 FY20 and trends for FY17 to FY20.

These reports are from the perspective of the visitor.

Visitor Statistics (2019 – 2020)

In FY20, Ombuds Officers met with 60 visitors: 28 in the Fall, 21 in the Spring, and 11 in the Summer. This is a 38% decrease in visits from FY19. This decrease in visits may be due to COVID-19 responses, such as shifting from in-person to virtual classes, students abruptly leaving campus Spring 2020, and a shift in focus and adjustment to pandemic (e.g., basic necessities, health, mental health). Fall 2019 visits occurred primarily in person (71%). Spring and Summer semester visits took place primarily through video conferencing (43% and 100%, respectively).

The Ombuds Officer made an average of 1.12 contacts per visitor ($SD = .45$) and spent an average of 66.50 minutes on each case ($SD = 33.65$).

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	63.3%	53.1%
Men	36.7%	46.9%
Ethnicity		
American Indian/Alaska Native	1.7%	.2%
Asian/Asian American	16.7%	7.5%
Black, Non-Hispanic	6.7%	4.5%
Hispanic/Latino	10%	13.3%
International	35.0%	25.8%
White, Non-Hispanic	45.0%	43.6%

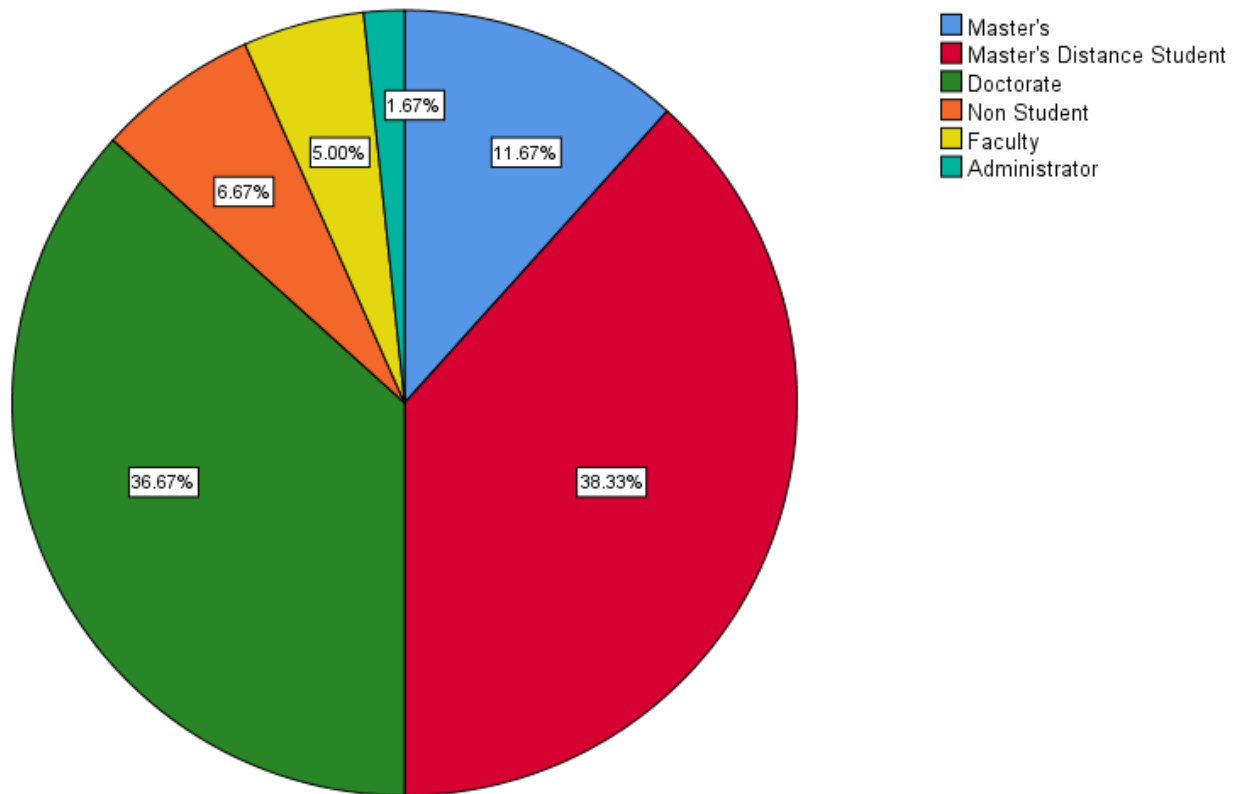
Visitor Role

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

Master's distance students are students enrolled in a 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/>)

Exhibit 2. Visitor Roles at the University



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 2020.

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

Exhibit 3. Visitors by College

College	Percent	Percent at TAMU
Agriculture and Life Sciences	20.3%	7.7%
Bush School	3.4%	3.4%
Mays Business School	1.7%	8.6%
Education and Human Development	16.9%	9.9%
Engineering	22.0%	23.8%
Geosciences	1.7%	2.4%
Liberal Arts	13.6%	5.4%
Architecture	5.1%	3.0%
Law	1.1%	5.9%
Public Health	3.4%	2.7%
Science	8.5%	7.4%
Veterinary Medicine and Biological Sciences	3.4%	5.8%

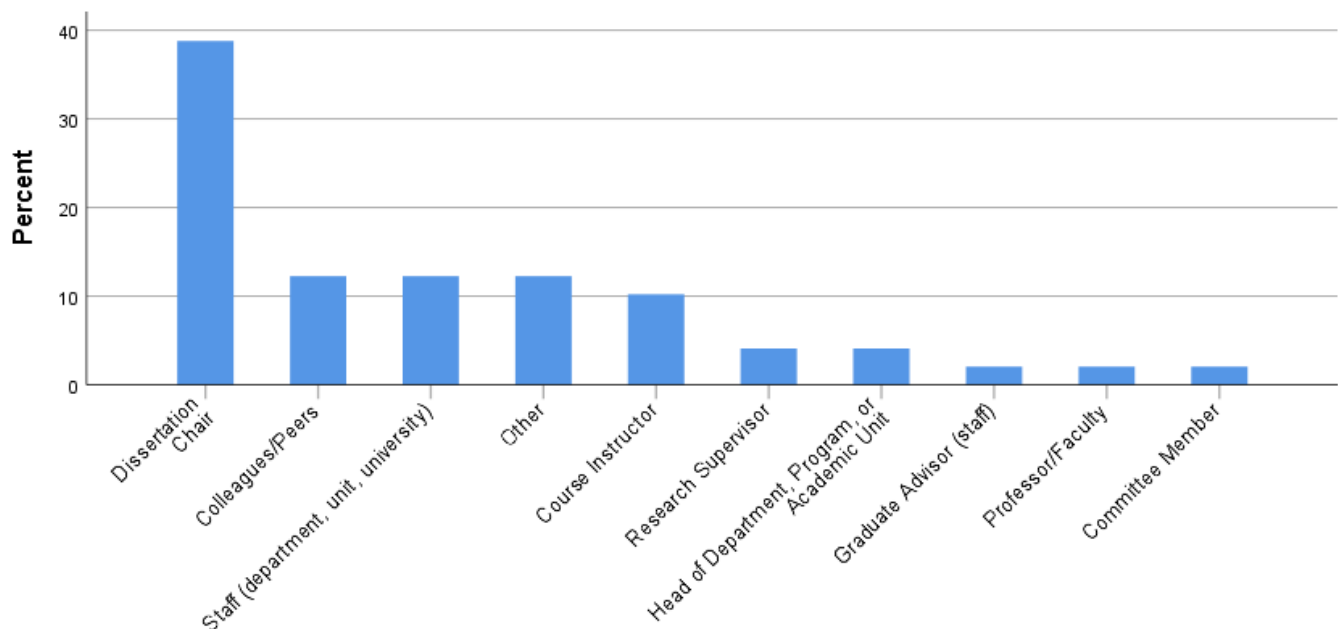
Nature of the Visit

The majority of students (38.8%) who visited the Ombuds Office expressed concerns with their dissertation chair. This was followed by conflicts with university staff, peers, and other sources (see Exhibit 4).¹

Approximately 29.1% of visitors shared concerns about receiving unfair or disrespectful treatment (see Exhibit 5). In regards to unfair treatment, most issues involved concerns about the arbitrary determination of publication authorship or conference presentations. Disrespectful treatment concerns involved peer conflicts on intra-ethnic and political conflicts.

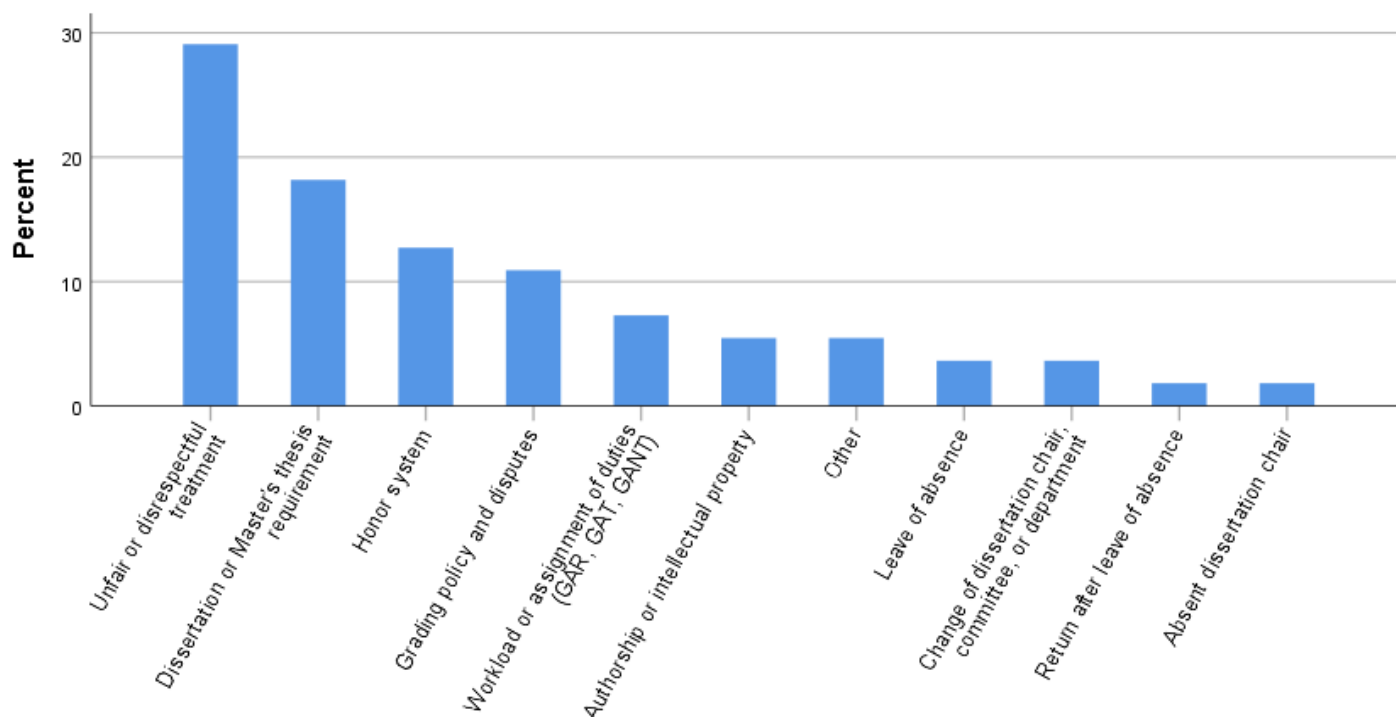
Approximately 18% sought assistance regarding conflict with dissertation or thesis requirements with the primary concern over lack of dissertation guidance by dissertation advisors or frequent changing of dissertation research requirements. Questions about the Aggie Honor System office process due to alleged academic dishonesty (12.7%) was the third leading purpose for visiting the Ombuds Office.

Exhibit 4. Primary Source of Concern



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).

Exhibit 5. Nature of Visit



Nature of Visit by Gender, Ethnicity, and College

Of all female visitors to the Ombuds Office, 22.4% expressed conflict with their dissertation chair followed by university staff (10.2%). For male visitors, 16.3% noted conflict with their dissertation chair followed by course instructors (8.2%).

For all students, except Black students, the top issue brought to the Ombuds Office was conflict with their dissertation chair. Black students' primary source of concern was course instructors.

Both men and women's top concern presented to the Ombuds Office was receiving unfair and disrespectful treatment (18.2% and 10.9%, respectively). The second top concerns differed for women who had questions about the honor system office (12.7%) whereas men reported concerns with grading policy and disputes (9.1%).

The top concern for White, Asian American, and international student visitors was unfair and disrespectful treatment (10.9%, 7.3%, and 14.5%, respectively). Latinx students' top concern was graduate assistantship issues (3.6%). Black students reported equal amounts of concern with change of dissertation chair or committee, grading disputes, and return after leave of absence.

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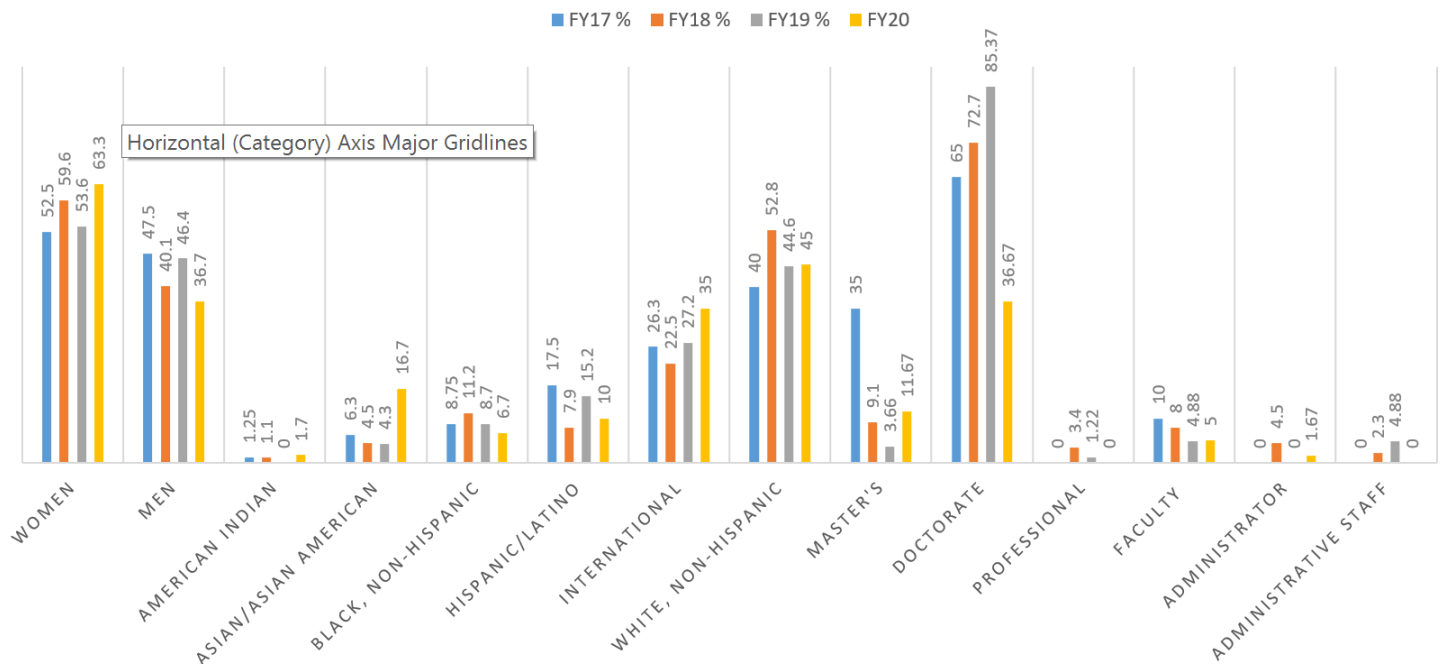
Issues of receiving unfair and disrespectful treatment were the top concerns brought by students of the College of Liberal Arts (5.5%), College of Agriculture and Life Science (7.3%), and College of Education and Human Development (3.6%). For visitors from the College of Engineering, the primary issues presented was the conflict with dissertation requirements (7.3%) This was followed by issues of receiving unfair and disrespectful treatment (5.5%).

Comparisons over Time, FY17 to FY20

In FY20, relative to previous years, the Ombuds Office saw the highest proportion of female students.

Compared to FY19, there was an increase in Asian/Asian American, international, female students, and master's students. There appears to be a downward trend of Black and professional students utilizing the Ombuds Office.

Exhibit 6. Demographic Differences, FY17 – FY20



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Dissertation chair, as the Primary Source of Concern brought to the Ombuds Office, appears to be steady across the four years. There appears to be a decrease in issues with course instructors and professors/faculty. Finally, there was a significant increase in concerns with university staff.

Unfair and Disrespectful Treatment as the Nature of Visit did not appear to have any appreciable change from FY17 to FY20 with an increase noted from FY19 to FY20.

Exhibit 7. Primary Source of Concern, FY17 – FY20

Person Involved	FY17 %	FY18 %	FY19 %	FY20 %
Dissertation Chair	39.1	48.7	31.7	38.8
Committee Member	0	0	4	2
Course Instructor	7.2	9	17.8	10.2
Professor/Faculty	18.8	12.8	8.9	2
Head of Dept., Program, or Unit	7.2	1.3	5.9	4.1
Graduate Advisor (Staff)	2.9	0	4	2
Director of Graduate Program (Faculty)	2.9	3.8	2	0
Staff (Dept., Unit, or University)	2.9	5.1	4	12.2
Research Supervisor	0	0	2	4.1
Colleagues (Grad, UG, Post-Doc)	2.9	2.6	2	12.2
Other	10.1	16.7	17.8	12.2

Exhibit 8. Nature of Visit, FY17 – FY20

Issue or Concern	FY17 %	FY18 %	FY19 %	FY20 %
Dissertation or Thesis Requirements	17.1	19.2	15	18.2
Other degree requirements	7.1	3.8	6.5	0
Grading policies and disputes	17.1	7.7	14	10.9
Workload or assignment duties	4.3	7.7	8.4	7.3
Authorship or intellectual property	2.9	2.6	5.6	5.5
Change of major professor, committee, or dept.	12.9	10.3	4.7	3.6
Unfair or disrespectful treatment	22.9	23.1	25.2	29.1
Separation (probation, suspension, dismissal)	2.9	10.3	1.9	0
Leave of absence (medical, financial, family)	4.3	0	0	3.6
Return after separation or leave of absence	1.4	1.3	0	1.8
Other	7.1	14.1	11.2	5.5