

# Texas A&M University

## GRADUATE STUDENT OMBUDS SERVICES

Annual Report

2017-2018

## 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

People can make an appointment with the Ombuds Officer through the Office of Graduate and Professional Studies at [ombuds@tamu.edu](mailto:ombuds@tamu.edu). Face-to-face meetings are preferred, but we also conduct phone and Skype meetings.

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.

# Texas A&M University

## Standards of Practice

The [Code of Ethics](#) and [Standards of Practice](#) of the International Ombudsman Association (IOA) guide our practice of ombudsmanship. 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.

### Ethical Principles International Ombudsman Association\*



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

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

**Confidentiality.** 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.

**Informality.** 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.

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

## OMBUDS OFFICER SERVICES

### Background and Process

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 AY18, analyze trends for FY15 to FY18, and conduct additional analyses with the entire dataset.

These are reports from the perspective of the visitor.

# Texas A&M University

## VISITOR STATISTICS (2017-2018)

In FY18, Ombuds Officers met with 90 visitors: 24 in the Fall, 49 in the Spring, and 24 in the Summer. Most of the visits ( $n = 71$ , 79 percent) occurred in person, followed by telephone meetings ( $n = 18$ , 20 percent), and a video conference ( $n = 1$ , 1 percent).

The Ombuds Officer made an average of 1.47 contacts per visitor ( $SD = 1.69$ ) and spent an average of 70.22 minutes on each case ( $SD = 43.09$ )

### Demographics

Most of the visitors were women. With respect to race and ethnicity, most of the visitors were Non-Hispanic Whites, followed by International visitors, Non-Hispanic Blacks, Hispanic/Latinos, Asian/Pacific Islanders, American Indian/Alaska Natives, and persons who did not provide the information. 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 Blacks, and International students were all more likely to visit the Ombuds Office.

Exhibit 1. Visitor Demographics, 2018

College	Percent	Percent at TAMU
Gender		
Women	59.6%	43.4%
Men	40.1%	52.7%
Ethnicity		
American Indian/Alaska Native	1.1%	0.2%
Asian	4.5%	6.8%
Black, Non-Hispanic	11.2%	7.0%
Hispanic/Latino	7.9%	20.5%
International	22.5%	8.6%
White, Non-Hispanic	52.8%	57.0%

As seen in Exhibit 2, most of the visitors were doctoral students, followed by master’s students, faculty members, administrators, professional students, and administrative staff. Two persons did not provide role information.

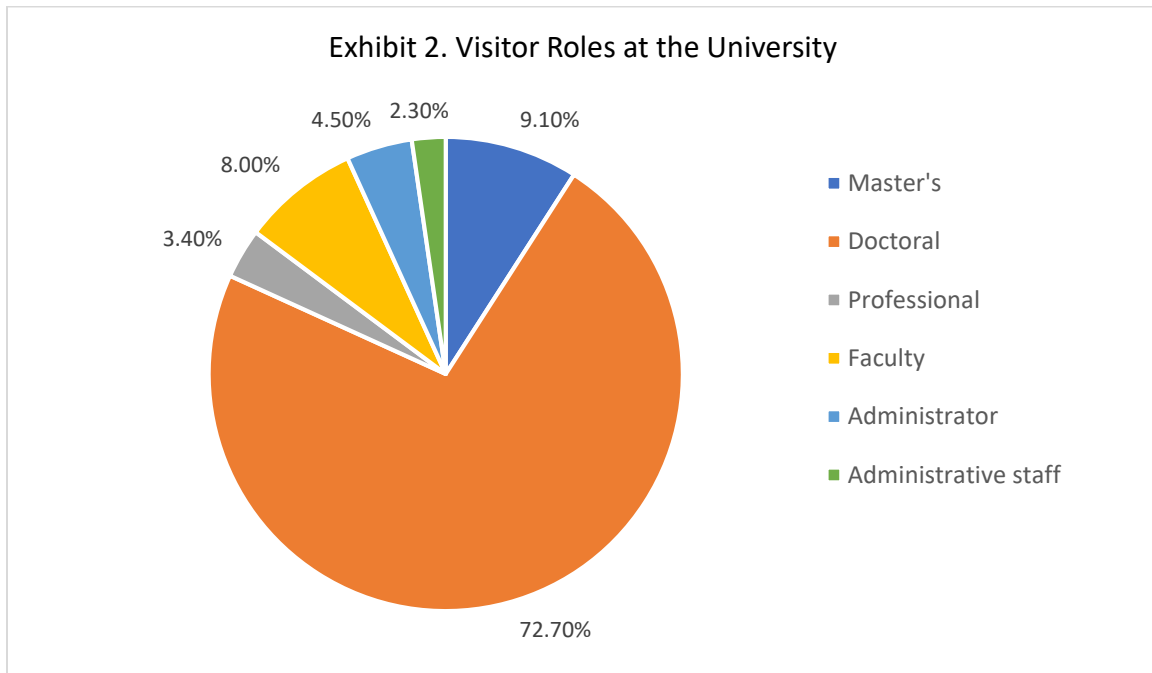


Exhibit 3 provides information about the college affiliations of the visitors. As a point of comparison, the same exhibit includes the relative proportion of students from that college at the university in [Fall 2017](#). Most of the visitors in 2018 came from four colleges: Engineering, Education and Human Development, Agriculture and Life Sciences, and Liberal Arts.

Visitors from Agriculture and Life Sciences, Education and Human Development, Liberal Arts, and (to a lesser degree) Architecture 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, 2018

College	Percent	Percent at TAMU
Agriculture and Life Sciences	15.5%	10.4%
Architecture	4.8%	3.9%
Mays Business School	2.4%	9.4%
Education and Human Development	19.0%	13.0%
Engineering	26.2%	29.8%
Geosciences	1.2%	2.7%
Liberal Arts	13.1%	6.8%
Medicine	2.4%	7.0%
Nursing	1.2%	0.5%
Pharmacy	3.6%	3.7%
Science	8.3%	9.5%
Veterinary Medicine and Biological Sciences	2.4%	6.7%

## Nature of the Visit

The plurality of visitors expressed concerns with their major professor, followed by other faculty members (e.g., committee members), or their course instructor. Exhibit 4 provides an overview.

In terms of the nature of the visit, the plurality of visitors indicated they had experienced unfair or disrespectful treatment from another person on campus. On several occasions, the nature of the complaint necessitated contacting other parties on campus (e.g., Dean of Faculty for discrimination; Tell Somebody for bodily harm). Others asked questions or sought clarity about the requirements for their thesis or dissertation.

Ten percent of the visitors had been suspended or dismissed from their programs and sought guidance on the appeal process. Another ten percent sought guidance on how to change their committee chair or other committee members. Exhibit 5 provides a breakdown of the information.

Exhibit 4. Primary Source of Concern

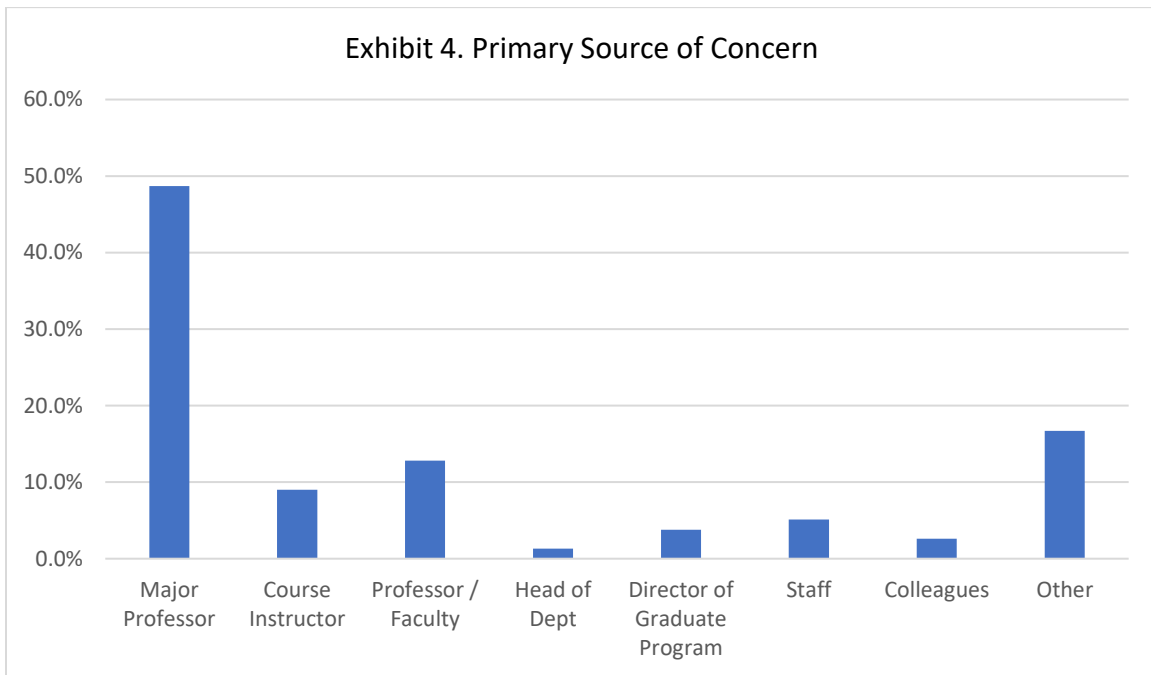
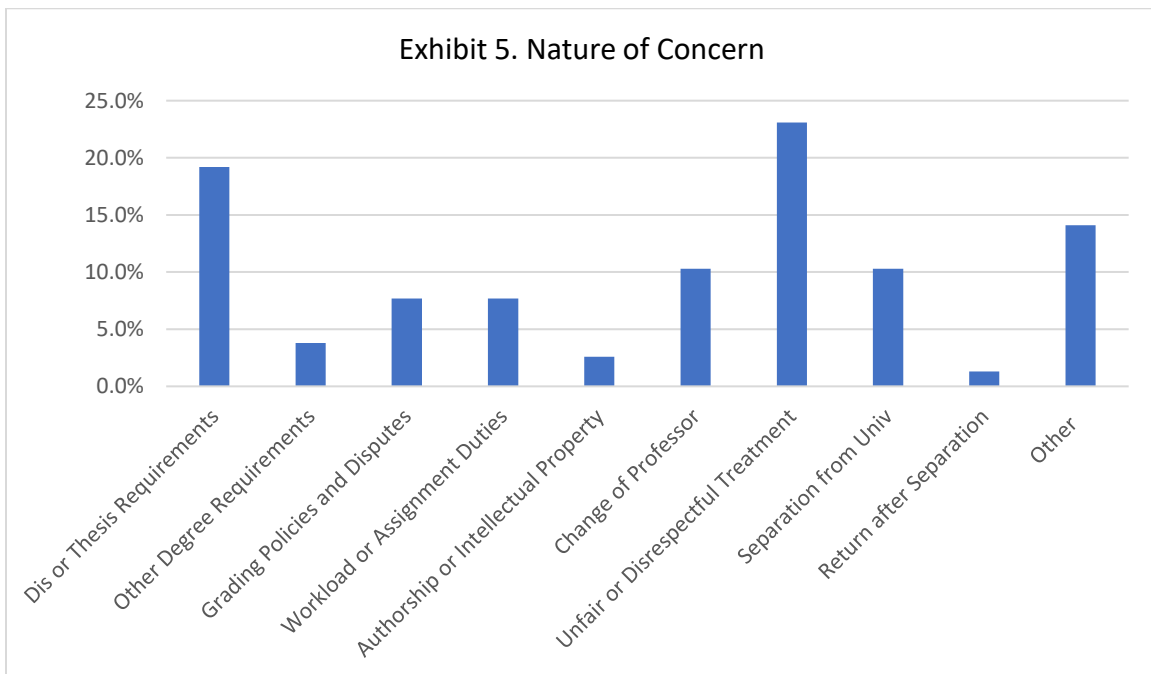


Exhibit 5. Nature of Concern

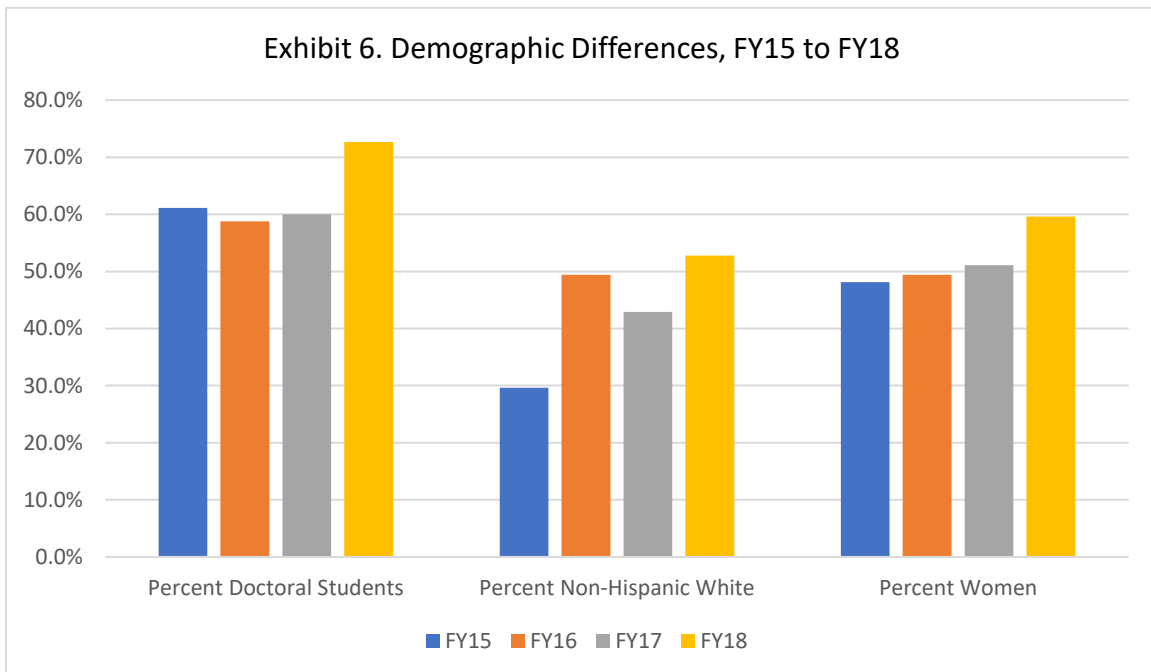




## COMPARISONS OVER TIME, FY15 TO FY18

The number of unique visitors to the Graduate Ombuds Office remained relatively steady over the past three years: FY15 = 54; FY16 = 80; FY17 = 95; FY18 = 90.

In FY18 relative to previous years, Graduate Ombuds Officers saw the highest proportion of doctoral students, Non-Hispanic Whites, and women. There were no differences in college affiliation of the visitor in the four years considered.



# Texas A&M University

The nature of the visit and person involved with the complaint did not appreciably change from FY15 to FY18.

Exhibit 7. Nature of Visit and Person involved in Complaint, FY15-FY18

Variable	FY15	FY16	FY17	FY18
<b>Person Involved</b>				
Major Professor	44.0%	31.5%	39.1%	48.7%
Committee Member	2.0%	4.1%	0.0%	0.0%
Course Instructor	0.0%	2.7%	7.2%	9.0%
Professor/Faculty	10.0%	12.3%	18.8%	12.8%
Head of Dept., Program, or Unit	30.0%	20.5%	7.2%	1.3%
Graduate Advisor (Staff)	0.0%	6.8%	2.9%	0.0%
Director of Graduate Program (Faculty)	8.0%	2.7%	8.7%	3.8%
Staff (Dept., Unit, or University)	2.0%	2.7%	2.9%	5.1%
Research Supervisor	0.0%	1.4%	0.0%	0.0%
Colleagues (Grad, UG, Post-Doc)	0.0%	5.5%	2.9%	2.6%
Other	4.0%	9.6%	10.1%	16.7%
<b>Issue or Concern</b>				
Dissertation or Thesis Requirements	15.1%	11.3%	17.1%	19.2%
Other degree requirements	15.1%	1.3%	7.1%	3.8%
Grading policies and disputes	0.0%	3.8%	17.1%	7.7%
Workload or assignment duties	11.3%	15.0%	4.3%	7.7%
Authorship or intellectual property	9.4%	7.5%	2.9%	2.6%
Change of major professor, committee, or dept.	5.7%	8.8%	12.9%	10.3%
Unfair or disrespectful treatment	17.0%	23.8%	22.9%	23.1%
Separation (probation, suspension, dismissal)	20.8%	13.8%	2.9%	10.3%
Leave of absence (medical, financial, family)	0.0%	2.5%	4.3%	0.0%
Return after separation or leave of absence	1.9%	1.3%	1.4%	1.3%
Other	3.8%	11.3%	7.1%	14.1%

## **ADDITIONAL ANALYSES**

We examined the overall dataset across the four years to examine predictors of the nature of the visit and the person involved.

### **Gender**

Women were almost twice as likely as men to visit the Ombuds Officer because of unfair or disrespectful treatment (27.3 percent and 15.4 percent, respectively) or because of workload and assignment concerns (12.6 percent and 6.6 percent, respectively). On the other hand, men were more likely than women to visit an Ombuds Officer with questions about separation from the program or university (14.0 percent and 9.1 percent, respectively).

### **Race and Ethnicity**

With respect to race and ethnicity, 50 percent of International students visited a Graduate Ombuds Officer with concerns about their major professor—a proportion higher than any other race or ethnicity. U.S. racial minorities (Non-Hispanic Blacks, Hispanic/Latinos, Asian Americans, and Native Americans) were more likely to report an issue with the Head of Department, Program, or Unit (20.9 percent) than were Whites (7.4 percent) or International students (15.0 percent)