

2013-2014

Office of the Provost and Vice
President for Academic Affairs

The University of Texas at San Antonio



[ANNUAL REPORT – ACADEMIC AFFAIRS OMBUDSPERSON 2013-2014]

Introduction

Albert Einstein once said, “Problems cannot be solved at the same level of awareness that created them.”¹ Employees within organizations sometimes have differing perceptions, complaints, concerns, and questions that require consideration and resolution. Universities have traditionally sought resolution through formal grievance procedures. These are often time-consuming and the outcome may not always be satisfactory. As part of the Office of the Provost and Vice President for Academic Affairs at The University of Texas at San Antonio, the Academic Affairs Ombudsperson is available to make the most of opportunities for informal resolution.

What is an Ombudsperson?

The term *ombudsman*, meaning representative, finds its origins in the Swedish language.² According to the International Ombudsman Association, an ombudsman is “a designated neutral” who serves the community within an organization. The position provides confidential, informal, independent, and impartial assistance using various problem-solving methods including but not limited to mediation, coaching, investigation, and facilitation.³

Role of the Academic Affairs Ombudsperson

For UTSA, the primary role of the Academic Affairs Ombudsperson is to assist faculty, staff, and student employees who encounter challenges within the Division of Academic Affairs. Services include listening to and discussing questions or concerns, providing and clarifying information, identifying and evaluating options, acting as a facilitator or mediator, serving as a referral agent and making recommendations for change to enhance the mission of the university.

The Academic Affairs Ombudsperson offers confidential services to all faculty, staff, and student employees in a safe and welcoming environment and communicates with various representatives and offices to respond to and help resolve concerns in a timely manner. The Academic Affairs Ombudsperson reports to the Provost and Vice President for Academic Affairs, but is not an office of notice.

¹ “Albert Einstein Quotes,” Albert Einstein Site Online, last modified Jan. 8, 2012, accessed June 5, 2014, <http://www.alberteinstein.com/quotes/einsteinquotes.html#general>.

² “Ombudsman,” Merriam-Webster, last modified 2014, accessed June 5, 2014, <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/ombudsman>.

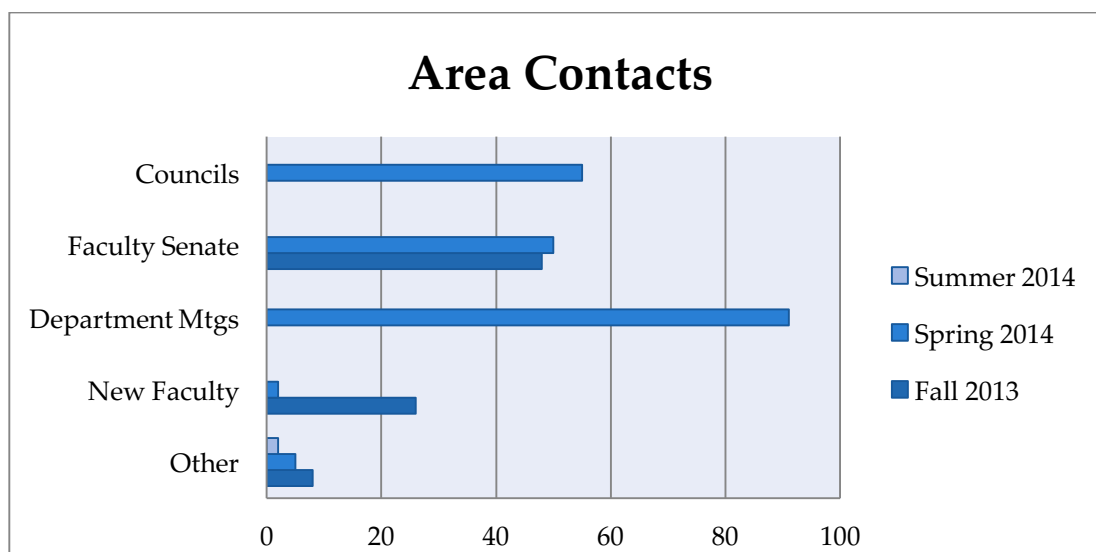
³ “What is an Organizational Ombudsman?” The International Ombudsman Association, 2007-2014, accessed June 5, 2014, <https://www.ombudsassociation.org/Resources/Frequently-Asked-Questions.aspx>.

Promotion

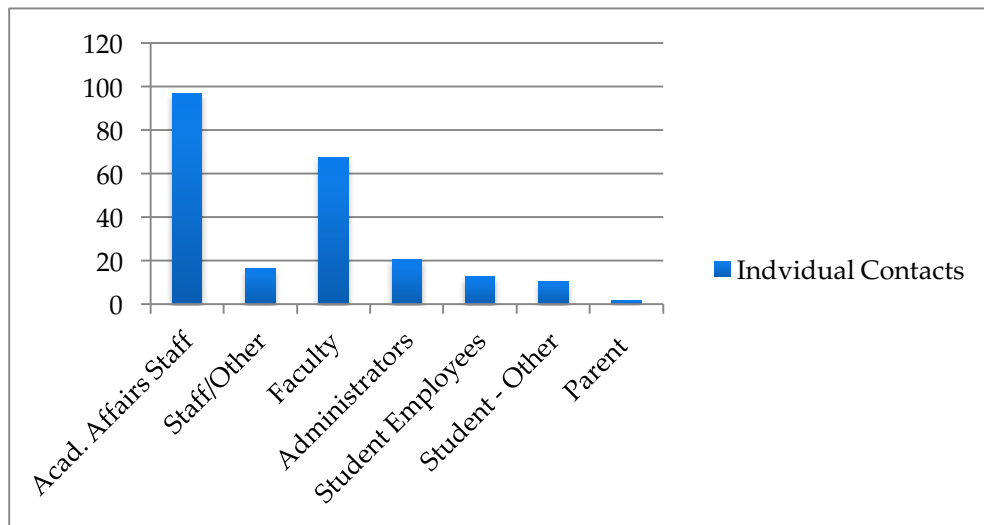
The role of the Academic Affairs Ombudsperson was initially publicized through an article in *UTSA Today*, the official news source for the UTSA community. Subsequently, the Academic Affairs Ombudsperson worked in partnership with the Assistant Dean & Director of Student Conduct and Community Standards by accompanying her to faculty meetings to support the processes within the area and using the opportunity to reintroduce the position to faculty. The position was also introduced through co-presentations with the Student Affairs Ombudsperson during orientation for new undergraduate students and their parents as well as through one-on-one meetings with new faculty. Contact information is referenced on the Academic Affairs Ombudsperson web page -- <http://provost.utsa.edu/home/ombudsperson.asp>.

Statistics

Area Contacts

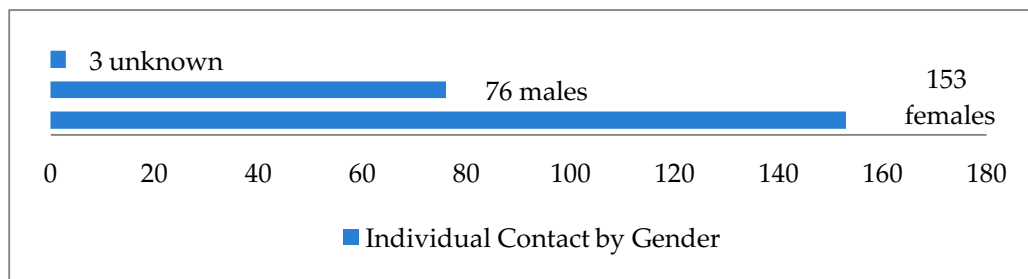


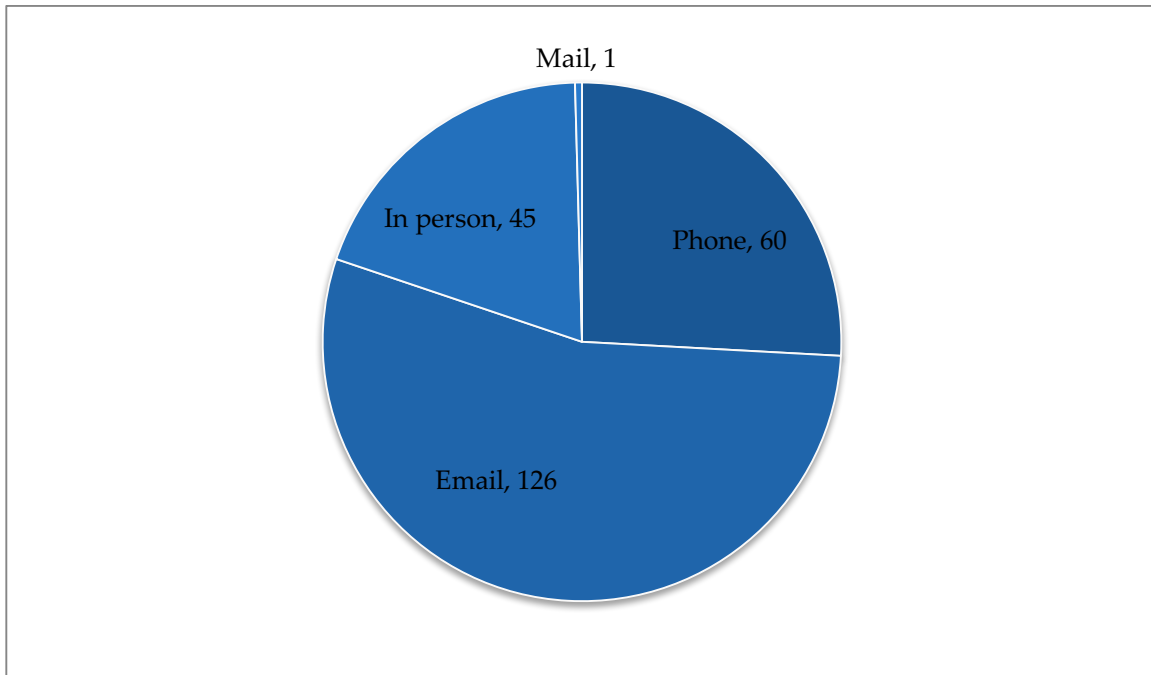
From July 2013 through August 2014, the Academic Affairs Ombudsperson made contact based on invitations and solicitations. A total of 287 individuals within various academic areas were visited and introductions made. The majority of visits were to governing councils including Faculty Senate (34%) and Chairs Council (19%) followed by department meetings (32%), new faculty (10%), and other (5%), which includes staff offices within Academic Affairs, Business Affairs and Student Affairs.

Individual Contacts – All

Between 2013-2014 academic year, this office had 232 individual visitors who sought the services of the ombudsperson. Academic Affairs staff constituted 42% of the contacts. Students who contacted this office for non-employee related issues were referred to the Student Ombudsperson in Student Affairs. Individual contacts included the following:

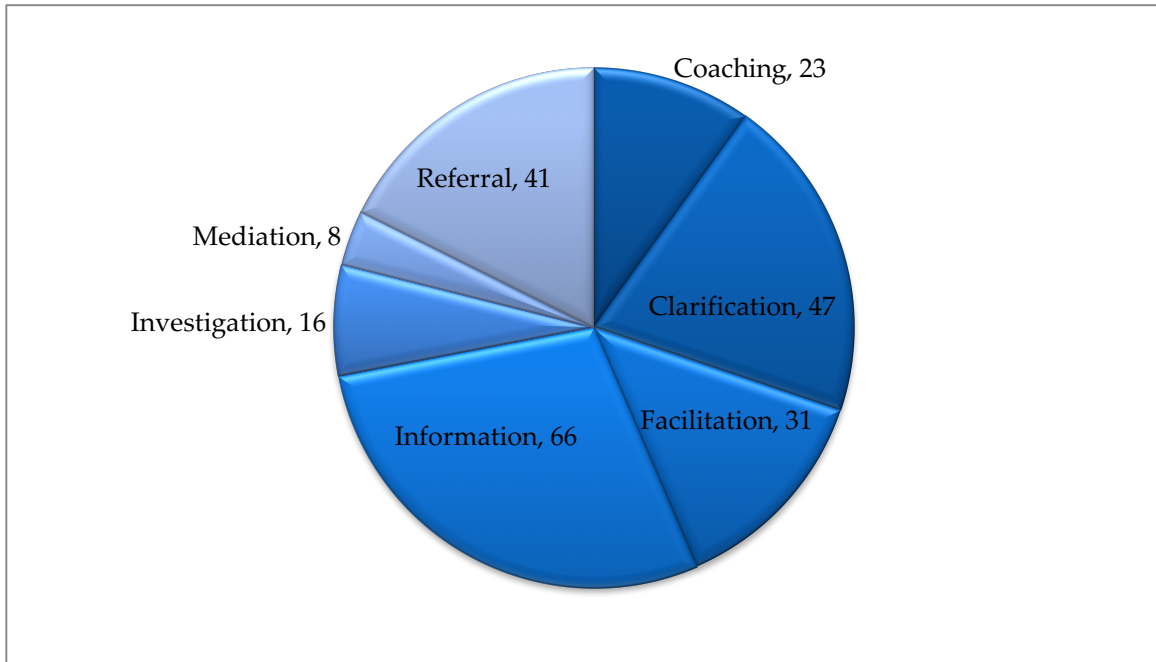
- Acad. Affairs Staff– 42% Employees (non-faculty) within various offices
- Staff/Other – 7% Employees outside of Academic Affairs
- Faculty – 29% Faculty from various colleges and departments
- Administrators – 9% Department Chair or higher and non-Acad. Affairs
- Student Employees – 6% Students employees in academic offices/labs (19 hour or less appt.)
- Students/Other – 5% All were referred to Student Ombudsperson
- Parents – 1% Inquiry by mother, father, step parent, or guardian
- Unknown – 1% Identity could not be confirmed

Identity

Contact Type

Contacts were primarily via email (54%) followed by phone conversations (26%), and in person meetings* (19%). Mail received was forwarded to the appropriate area.

(*Face-to-face meetings took place in ombudsperson's office as well as other campus locations including the Downtown Campus.)

Action Taken

Information (28%) and clarification (20%) were the actions most often used for individuals seeking assistance through the Academic Affairs Ombudsperson office. These actions were followed by referrals (18%), facilitation/training (13%), and Coaching (10%). In a few instances, investigation (7%) and mediation (3%) were necessary.

- Advice – Some individuals were seeking advice
- Clarification – Most individuals needed some clarification
- Coaching – Some individuals sought help improving professional skills
- Facilitation – Some individuals requested facilitation support
- Information – Individuals were seeking information in a variety of categories
- Intervention – Some individuals requested assistance to resolve an issue
- Investigation – Some individuals were seeking investigative support
- Mediation – A few requested mediation support
- Referral – Some were referred to the appropriate areas
- Suggestions – Some offered suggestions for improvement in various areas

Note: Multiple actions were necessary in some cases.

Areas of Concern

Area of Concern	Total		Total
Change	46	Personnel Issues	37
Communication	34	Policy Concerns	24
Faculty Development Leave	6	Research Ethics	6
Grades	2	Student Employees	17
PeopleSoft	51	Travel	9
Grand Total			232

Areas of concern crossed divisions including Academic Affairs, Business Affairs, Student Affairs, and Research. Concerns expressed most often involved PeopleSoft, change, personnel issues, and communication. Policy, student employee issues, travel, research ethics, and faculty development leave were also of concern. Below, the areas are assessed collectively to provide context on the types of concerns or inquiries conveyed to the Academic Affairs Ombudsperson.

- PeopleSoft Concerns (51)
 - Concerns about information flow
 - Concerns over lack of clarity
 - Inquiries about process
 - Questions about the timeline
 - Concerns over lack of training
- Change (46)
 - Concerns over lack of clarity
 - Concerns about fairness
 - Inquiries about process
- Communication (34)
 - Concerns about information flow
 - Lack of communication between supervisors and staff
 - Inquiries about confidentiality and neutrality
- Personnel Issues (37)
 - Employee/supervisor relationship concerns
 - Assertions of retaliation
 - Concerns over inequality
 - Allegations of differential treatment

- Policy Concerns (24)
 - Inquiries about process
 - Concerns over lack of clarity
 - Assisted in understanding process
- Student Employee Concerns (17)
 - Concerns over frequency of student employees losing positions
 - Inquiries about the process
- Travel (9)
 - Inquiries about travel payment process
 - Concerns over lack of training
 - Questions about process, timeline, signatures
 - Concern about not being paid in a timely manner
- Faculty Development Leave(6)
 - Inquiries about the process
 - Concerns over lack of clarity
- Research Ethics (6)
 - Concerns about research practice
 - Employee/supervisor relationship concerns
 - Assertions of retaliation
 - Allegations of differential treatment
- Grades (2)
 - Referral to Student Affairs Ombudsperson

In most cases, questions and concerns were resolved by providing information, clarification or in some instances direct communication with an on-campus representative. Communication was positive and productive which assisted in a timely resolution of most issues. To determine the best course of action in some circumstances further investigation, and/or discussion was required. The ombudsperson made referrals in a few cases.

Recommendations

Beginning July 2013, the reporting line of the ombudsperson shifted from the Division of Research to the Provost and Vice President for Academic Affairs. Concerns shared through faculty meetings, introductions and individual meetings suggested the ombudsperson should

report to the highest level possible within the UTSA structure. This recommendation shifted the reporting line of the position directly to the Provost and Vice President for Academic Affairs.

Other recommendations meant to improve communication and services crossed division lines. The PeopleSoft implementation process created varying challenges. The ombudsperson shared concerns with various stakeholders. Discussions included recommendations to improve communication to the UTSA community. The ombudsperson provided support.

Concern for reorganization of the Academic Affairs advising structure was another area that allowed the ombudsperson to offer and facilitate workshops about change. Various advising areas, totaling 56 participants received the program. Recommendations from the workshops were shared with various stakeholders, again with the Academic Affairs Ombudsperson providing support to those entities.

Contact Information

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<http://provost.utsa.edu/vpafs/ombudsperson.asp>