

OFFICE OF THE UNIVERSITY OMBUDS

ANNUAL REPORT

JULY 1, 2022-JUNE 30, 2023

For the Syracuse University Community



Syracuse
University

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INTRODUCTION, HISTORY AND PHILOSOPHY

This serves as the 2022-23 annual report from Neal Powless, Syracuse University Ombuds. The report includes data from July 2022 through June 2023 in alignment with the University's fiscal year which covers the summer, fall and spring semesters.

THE OFFICE OF THE UNIVERSITY OMBUDS was established in February 2018 at the recommendation of the University Senate Committee on Women's Concerns and the Chancellor's Workgroup on Diversity and Inclusion. Professor Emeritus Samuel Clemence was named to head the office in an interim capacity and a search committee was formed to identify a permanent ombuds. Neal Powless assumed leadership of the office in January 2019 after being part of the University in a variety of roles since 2004. The ombuds' office serves all graduate students, faculty and staff of Syracuse University. The office is currently located in the lower level of 111 Waverly Ave., which is home to a few universally used offices that also serve the same constituents. The office consists of the ombuds, a graduate student ombuds intern and the office assistant who manages all scheduling and public inquiries as well as triages issues for the office.

THE PRIMARY PHILOSOPHY of the Office of the University Ombuds remains to support and empower individuals to manage their conflicts in an environment that is confidential, informal, independent and neutral. Visitors experience a confidential conversation that allows the opportunity to explore options to resolve the conflicts they are experiencing. Each visitor is given the option to share what they feel is needed about their experience. They receive a plethora of options, without judgement, and this empowers them to act on an option that fit best for them. This experience for many has been cathartic and has allowed visitors to be open to engage in behaviors and conversations that have led to some form of a resolution.

“ I wanted to take the opportunity to thank you so very much for presenting at our Conversation in Conflict Studies. It was an honor to have you talk to us about your experiences, research and insights. Everything you had to say and the way that you wove it into your family life, upbringing, education, career and personal trials was so inspiring and relevant to everyone present at the talk. This was my first event-hosting experience at the University, and it was an absolute pleasure sharing it with you. ”

REFLECTION FROM A TRAINING PARTICIPANT

ACCOMPLISHMENTS

This year the Office of the University Ombuds managed a full load of cases and presentations of services as well as trainings for the entire University. The ombuds' office made notable progress in the following areas:

- Continued office operations with hybrid in-person/virtual/phone options for all visitor appointments and meetings
- Completed the second year of having a graduate student intern, which has increased office use by graduate and Ph.D. students
- Launched and conducted the Bullying Training sessions as well as collaborated on additional opportunities to amend this training
- Visitor referrals from presentations has increased by 25% this fiscal year
- Positive impact continues to be reported informally through referrals, thank you notes, emails and in-person accounts of successful interactions

“ I am very grateful to have met you this year, even though it's under an unfortunate circumstance. I appreciate all that you have done for me, listening to me and showing your compassion to me. Syracuse University is very lucky to have you and for all that you do for our community. ”

ANONYMOUS VISITOR

OBSERVED TRENDS

1. Leadership inconsistencies, administrative decisions, power exploitation, peer interactions, hostility, bullying and incivility have contributed to a loss of trust in peers and created environments that range from negative to toxic.
2. A lack of policy or responsiveness to troublesome individuals and behavior has resulted in people feeling unheard and devalued until they feel the necessity to take decisive actions to avoid further negative interactions.
3. Issues of behaviors associated to biases around diversity, accessibility, gender, race, harassment, differing levels of commitment and knowledge around DEIA initiatives and communication regarding cultural competencies have created the perception of a lack of accountability.
4. Bullying and intimidation continue to be used as a form of abuse of power by those who are in leadership, administrative, advisory and supervisory roles.
5. Feelings of impediments to movement toward graduation/advancement has created animosity within academic and professional areas of the University.
6. Advising/mentoring for students continues to be inconsistent and problematic.

“ I appreciate you and all you do. I just wanted to share my thoughts about our growth opportunities in the area of public impact, and let you know that your gift for raising voice has been an inspiration for me. ”

ANONYMOUS VISITOR

SUMMARY

As the University Ombuds, I have observed individual growth by moving through struggles. In some ways, this can be described as resilience, which is the ability to handle tough situations and persevere through that struggle. There are many factors that impact and can support individual resilience both internal to the individual and external from the system or organization. I have seen resilience play a part in individual movement through conflict in both positive and negative ways. It is my hope, that as an institution we can best understand how the University community can build and support resilience for all members of the community that the office serves.

Health psychologist Kelly McGonigal references a study on stress in a TED Talk that she gave. Within that speech she acknowledges that the frame of thinking that an individual's belief of the effect of stress on health has a significant impact on their health outcomes. The conclusion is that "how you think and act can transform" your lived experience and health as related to stress. Thus, if an individual's frame is that stress is a part of personal growth, it can build a higher level of resilience. This result transcended the individual's surroundings and the beliefs of those around them, no matter the self-assessed stress levels of those others as high or low.

It may be possible that perceptions of stress and its impact on personal resilience has the potential to create cultural change within struggling areas of the University. Currently, the data from the ombuds' office shows that within the University, some individuals are struggling to see peers, colleagues and leaders as supports in their conflicted relationships. Change and conflict are inevitable, as is the stress associated with that change. But if training and a process is developed to support that change, there may be the potential for that area to build resiliency while moving through the conflicts. This may require work by individuals from all sides of the conflicts, to complete that shift in frame.

If you recognize some of the trends from this report as part of your lived experience, consider how the ombuds' office can support your transition to seeing the conflict as a space of growth and resilience. As the ombuds I would like to thank each of the visitors who came to the office with the courage to share their stories and to work through their struggles. Without them, this report would not be possible.

“ Thank you so much for taking the time to meet with our team! I really enjoyed getting to know my team on a deeper level and I'm excited to carry that knowledge with me into the new academic year, looking for ways to engage and honor everyone's colors as they are presented. Your ability to bring and balance truth and humor is a skill to be admired. ”

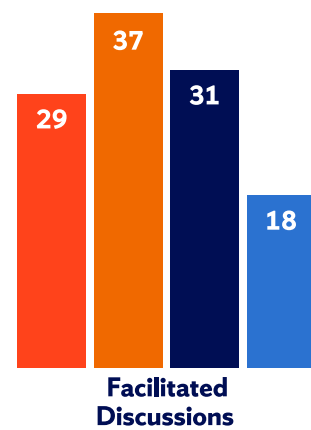
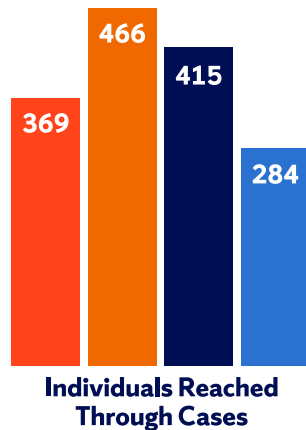
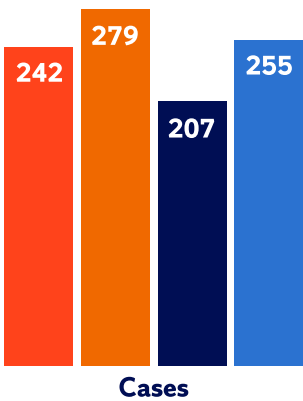
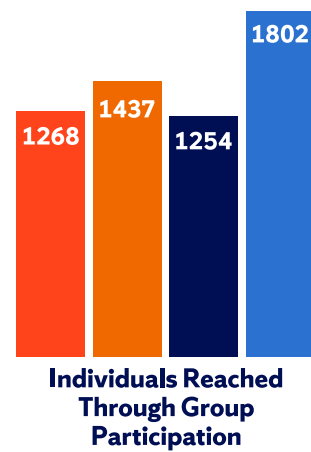
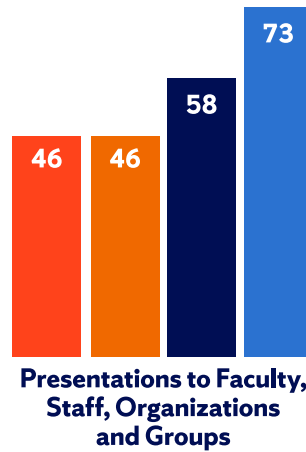
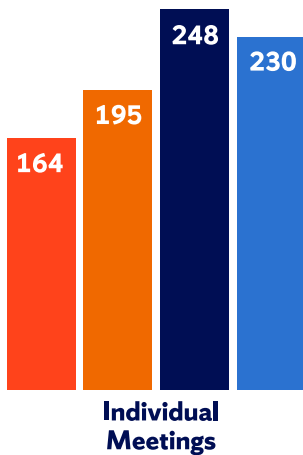
REFLECTION FROM PRESENTATION ATTENDEE

DATA FOR VISITORS AND OFFICE STATISTICS

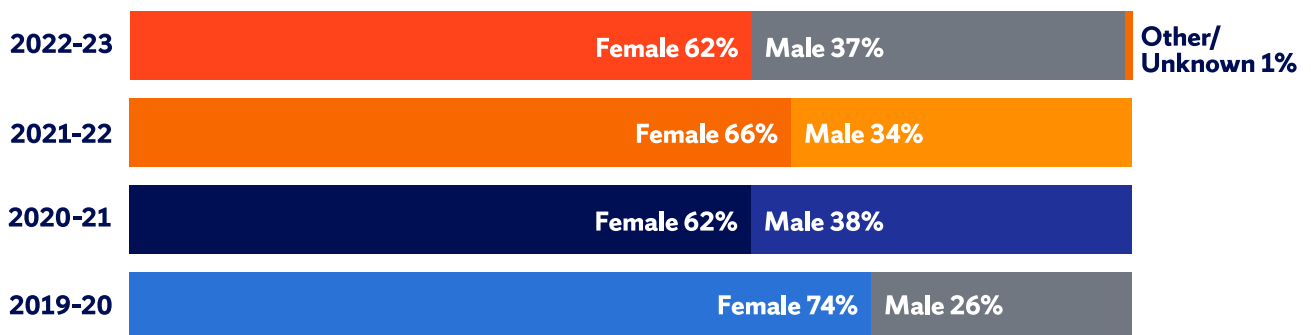
Comparison by Fiscal Year

By the Numbers

2022-23 2021-22 2020-21 2019-20



Cases by Demographics

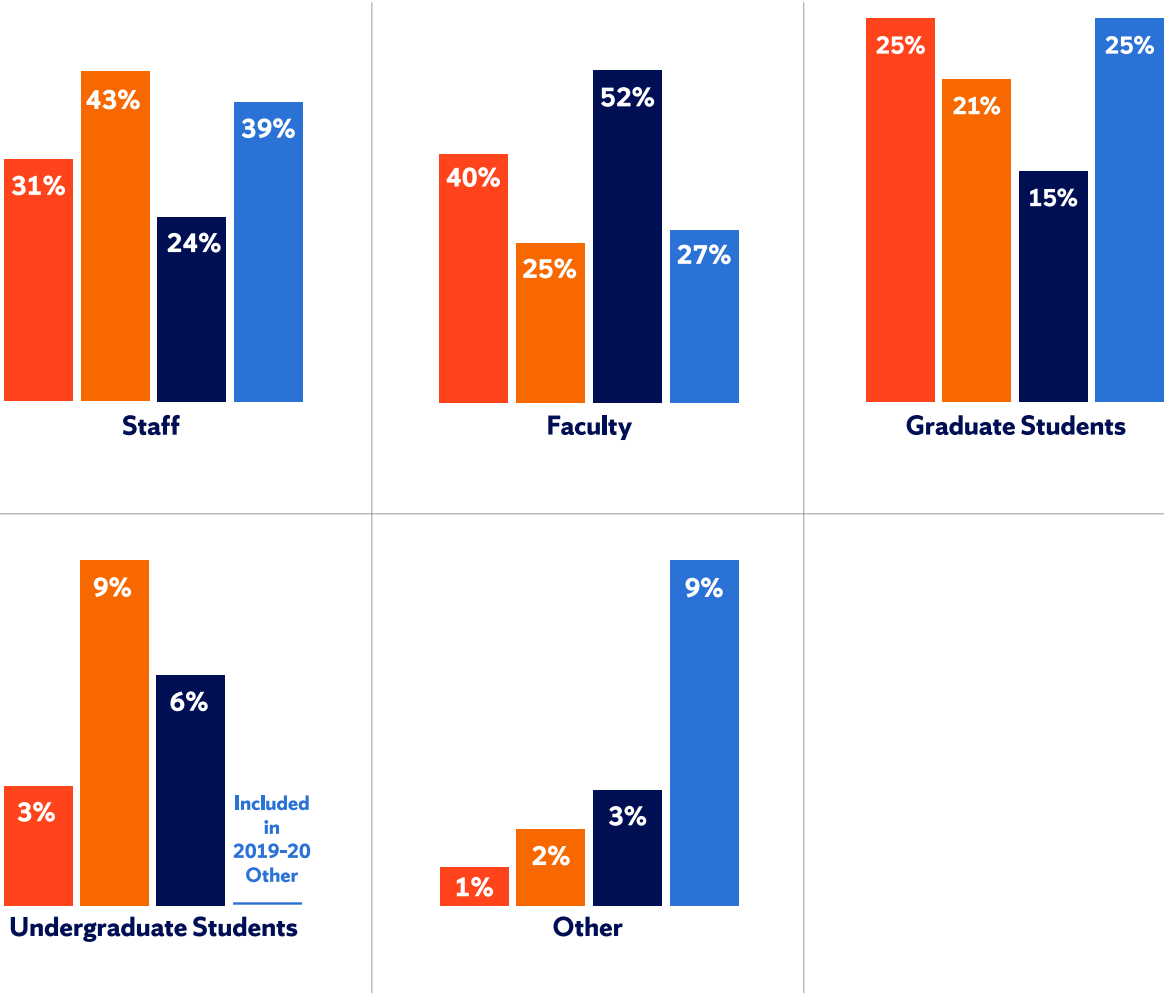


DATA FOR VISITORS AND OFFICE STATISTICS

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Cases by Status

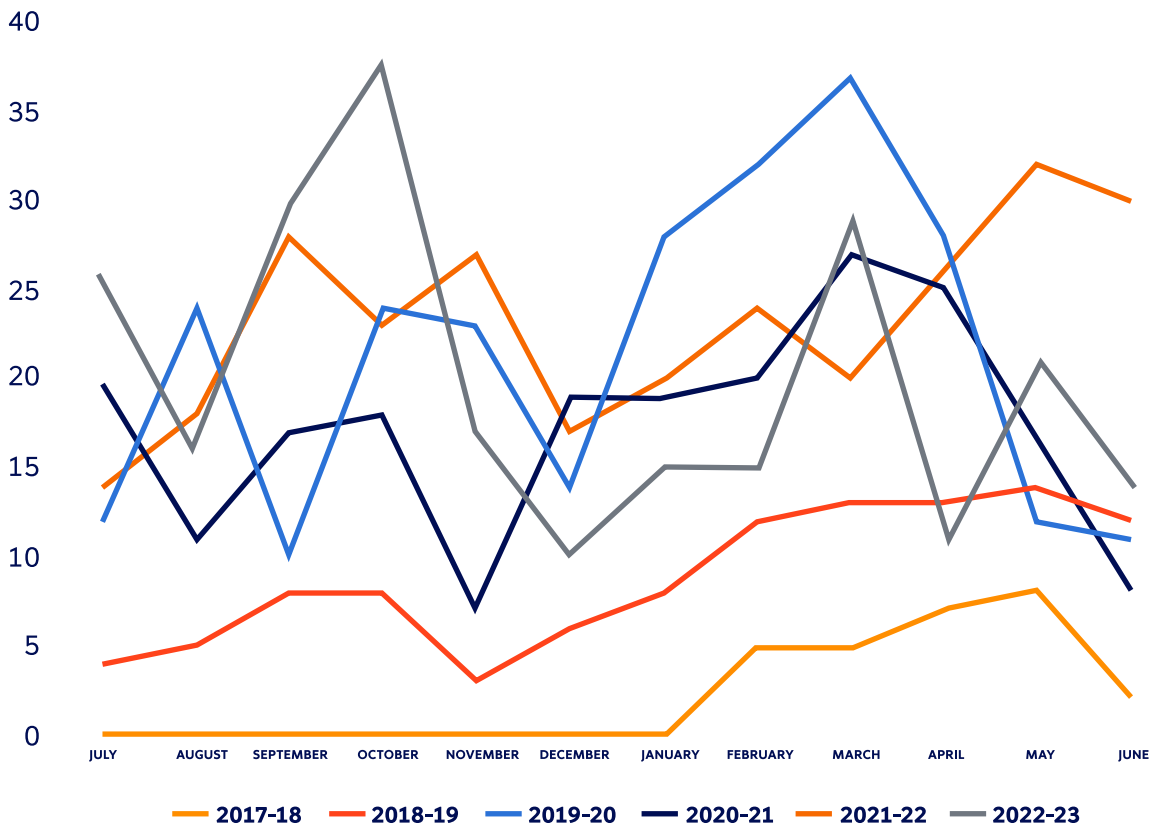
2022-23 2021-22 2020-21 2019-20



DATA FOR VISITORS AND OFFICE STATISTICS

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Fiscal Year Comparison of Case Load

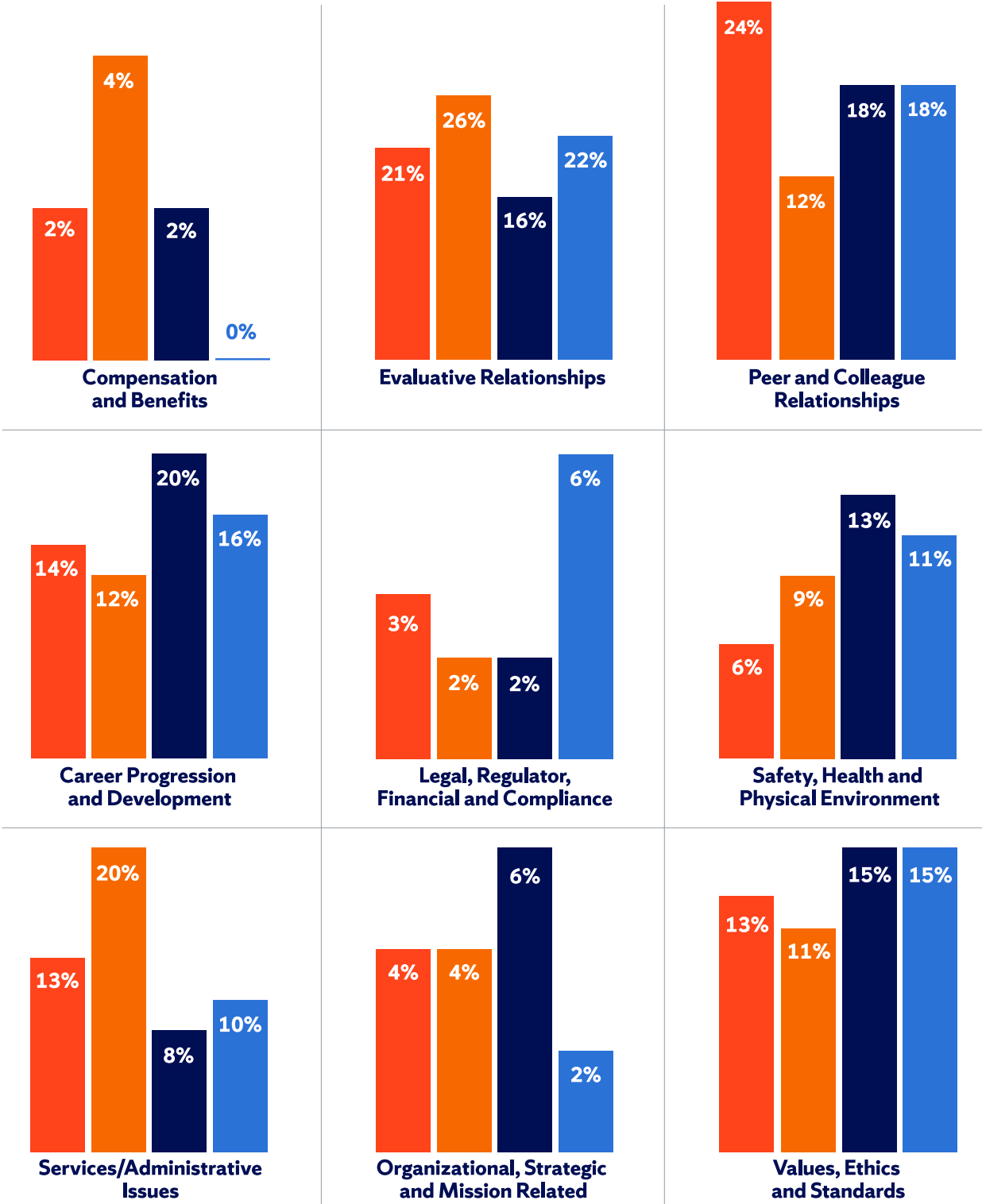


DATA FOR VISITORS AND OFFICE STATISTICS

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Systemic Categories

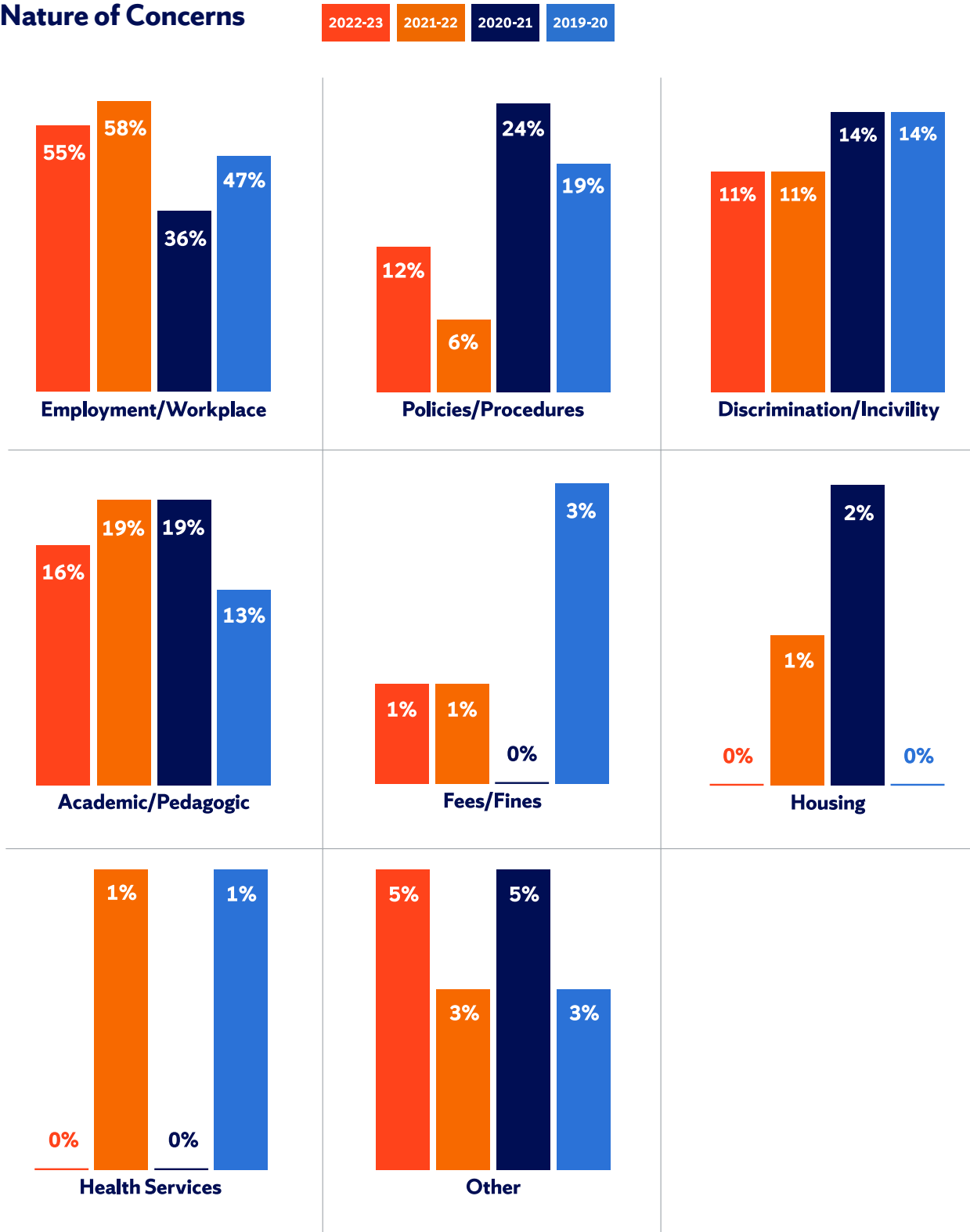
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DATA FOR VISITORS AND OFFICE STATISTICS

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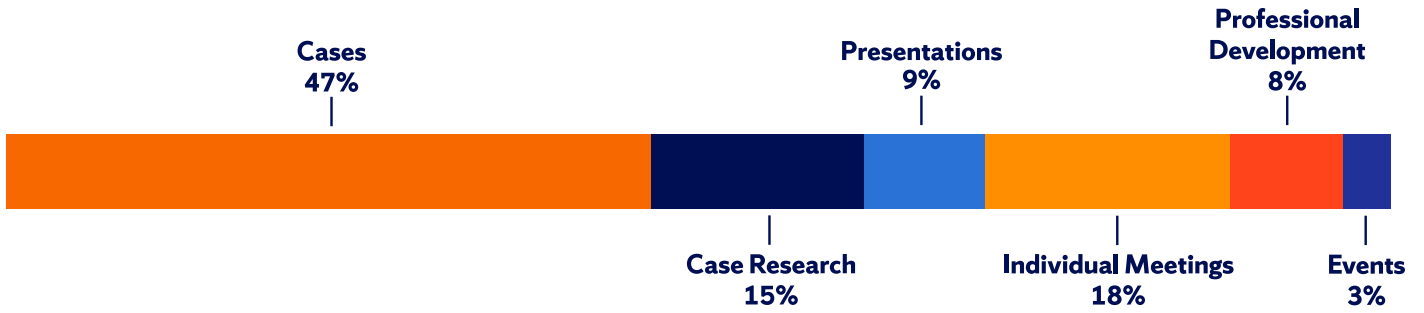
Nature of Concerns



DATA FOR VISITORS AND OFFICE STATISTICS

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Annual Review for the Ombuds Office



APPENDIX

Five Common Questions About the Office of the University Ombuds

1. What is an ombuds?

Taken from the Swedish word *ombudsman*, which roughly translates to “representative,” the ombuds exists to provide fair and equitable services and guidance to staff, faculty and graduate students. Often known as an “ear to the people,” the ombuds is an off-the-record, neutral body, operating with confidentiality, impartiality, informality and independence.

2. What does the ombuds do?

- The ombuds meets with staff, faculty and graduate students who seek a confidential avenue for addressing complaints, concerns and inquiries.
- The ombuds listens and provides guidance to visitors by:
 - assisting in clarifying university policies
 - helping evaluate options for conflict resolution
 - referring visitors to the right resources
 - sharing tactics for effective communication during conflict(s)

3. What does the ombuds not do?

- The ombuds does not “solve” problems internally.
- The ombuds has no authority to take formal action in response to complaints, and they cannot compel officers or administrators to take specific actions.
- The ombuds does not take sides for or against any individual, cause or position.
- The ombuds does not keep or share records unless given permission to do so by the visitor (the only exception being when there is an imminent risk of serious harm).
- Conversations with ombuds staff do not constitute notice to the University of any administrative or legal claims.

4. Why is the ombuds at Syracuse University necessary?

The ombuds specializes in listening and ensuring that staff, faculty and graduate students have a neutral space to express concerns that might exist in the University community.

5. Whom does the ombuds report to and how?

The ombuds provides reports to the Chancellor in a way that is independent of existing structures. By tracking trends and addressing concerns, the ombuds can help make suggestions for resolving concerns and supporting systemic change.