

UNIVERSITY OF
South Carolina

STAFF OMBUDS OFFICE ANNUAL REPORT 2024-25



ABOUT THE OFFICE

The Staff Ombuds Office was launched on Jan. 16, 2024, to provide an independent, informal, confidential and neutral resource for exempt and non-exempt employees of the University of South Carolina campus to deal with conflict. Services include individual consultation, informal mediation, group facilitation and training as part of supporting a top-performing, fair, and healthy workplace environment.

Considerable outreach to promote the office was conducted, including the development of a dedicated website, online visitor feedback survey, promotional videos, marketing materials and in-person presentations at 13 colleges and university-wide venues, such as Staff Senate and Women's Leadership Institute annual conference.

As a result of these efforts, 49% of the visitors were self-referred while 22% were referred by a co-worker or colleague; 11% of the visitors were encouraged by their supervisors to meet with the ombuds; 12% of the visitors were referred by the Division of Human Resources Employee Relations and Organizational and Professional Development Offices within the visitor's unit; and 6% were referred by Staff Senate. Visitors represented nearly 50 different college and division units throughout the university.

ABOUT THE OMBUDS

Before coming to USC, Robynn Pease served as an organizational ombuds at Oregon State University where she consulted with faculty, staff, graduate and undergraduate students.

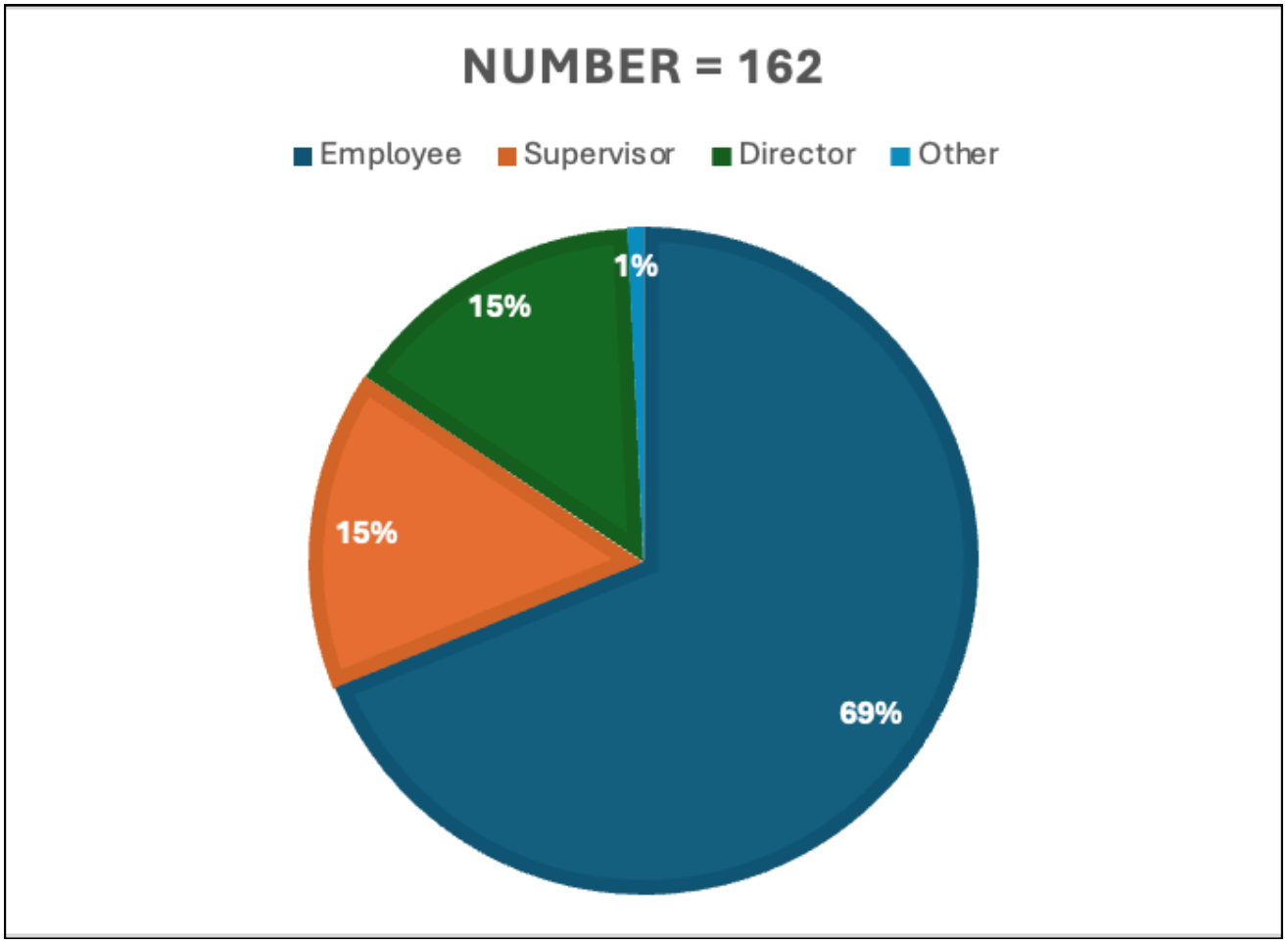
Additionally, she served as Assistant Director of the OSU Family Resource Center, director of the OSU Academic Affairs Office of Work-Life and the Greater Oregon Higher Education Recruitment Consortium, where she assisted staff, faculty and students with dependent care needs across the lifespan.

Robynn holds a doctorate from the University of Kentucky in Sociology with expertise in gerontology and social inequalities. She is a trained mediator, an active member of the International Ombuds Association and a certified long-term care ombudsman in Oregon and Kentucky.

OVERVIEW



VISITOR DATA AND REACH



Service	Services provided	Number served
Individual consultations (includes returning individuals with new concerns)	162	162
Mediations and group facilitated conversations	6	10
Trainings and presentations	20	500

RISKS AND RELATIONSHIPS

Visitor-expressed risks

These are the risks that visitors expressly stated. Of the 162 visitors, 41% identified at least one associated risk. Unresolved conflict creates risks and costs for the institution and/or the individual. Risks visitors expressed in consultations include:

- Risk of personal health and well-being (61)
- Risk of potential resignation (35)
- Risk of potential non-compliance (2)

Another common risk that wasn't expressed in any consultations at USC was the potential for legal action.

Relationships in conflict

There are a variety of relationships that staff have to navigate during their daily work with the majority having conflict with those higher up in their organization. Of the 162 visitors:

- 46% had concerns with their direct supervisors.
- 39% had concerns with their department leaders.
- 6% had conflict with a coworker.

Among those visitors who were supervisors:

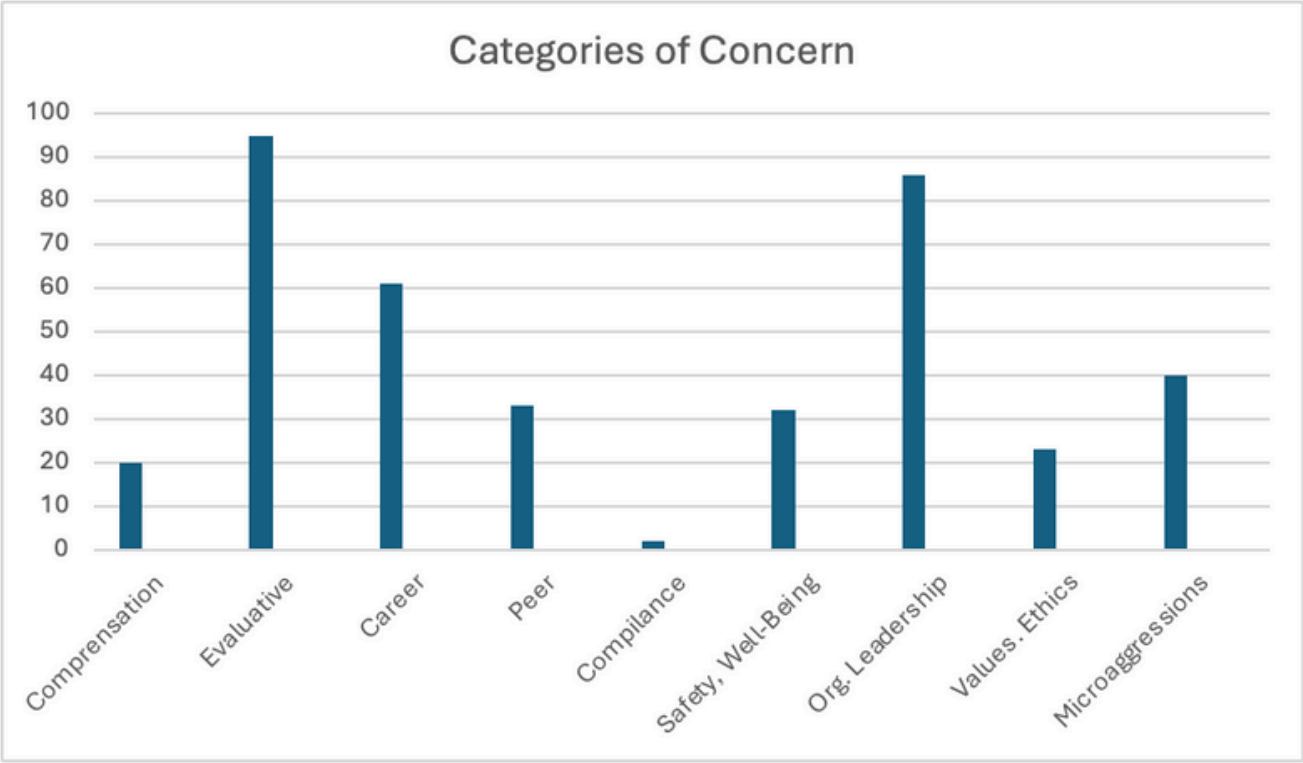
- 48% had concerns with their direct supervisor.
- 32% had concerns with an employee.
- Of the visitors who were directors or administrators, 70% had concerns with an employee.

MAIN CONCERNS

Following the International Ombuds Association (IOA) categories of data collection, the Staff Ombuds collected aggregate data for the following categories:

- Compensation and benefits.
- Evaluative (supervisor-employee relationships).
- Peer and colleague.
- Career progression.
- Compliance (legal, regulatory, financial compliance for the organization).
- Safety, health and well-being or physical environment (physical and psychological safety, work-life related stress).
- Organization and leadership (positional power of authority, communication, organizational climate, priority setting, change management).
- Values, ethics and standards (standards of conduct, values of the organization).
- Micro-aggressions (age, race/ethnicity, gender/sexual identity, ability, religion, other).

Most (76%) visitors expressed concerns that related to more than one main category.

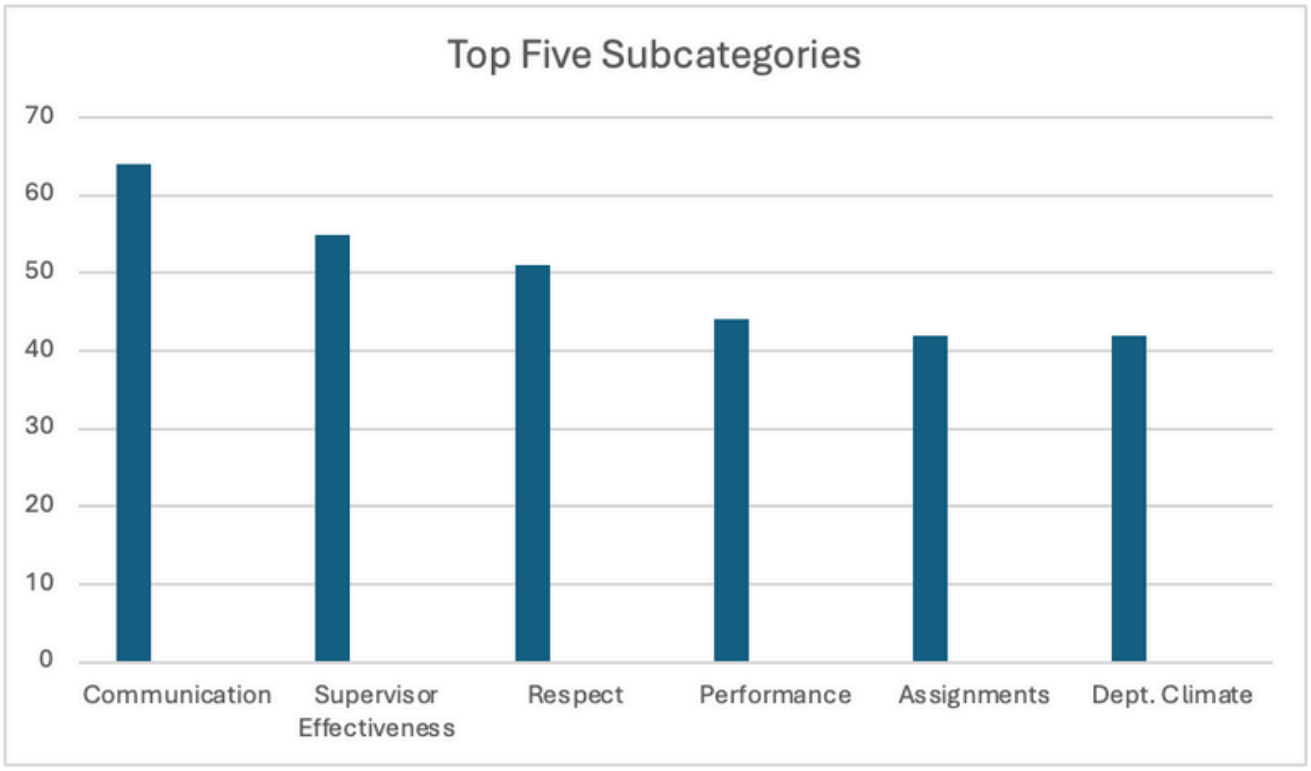


MAIN CONCERNS (CONT.)

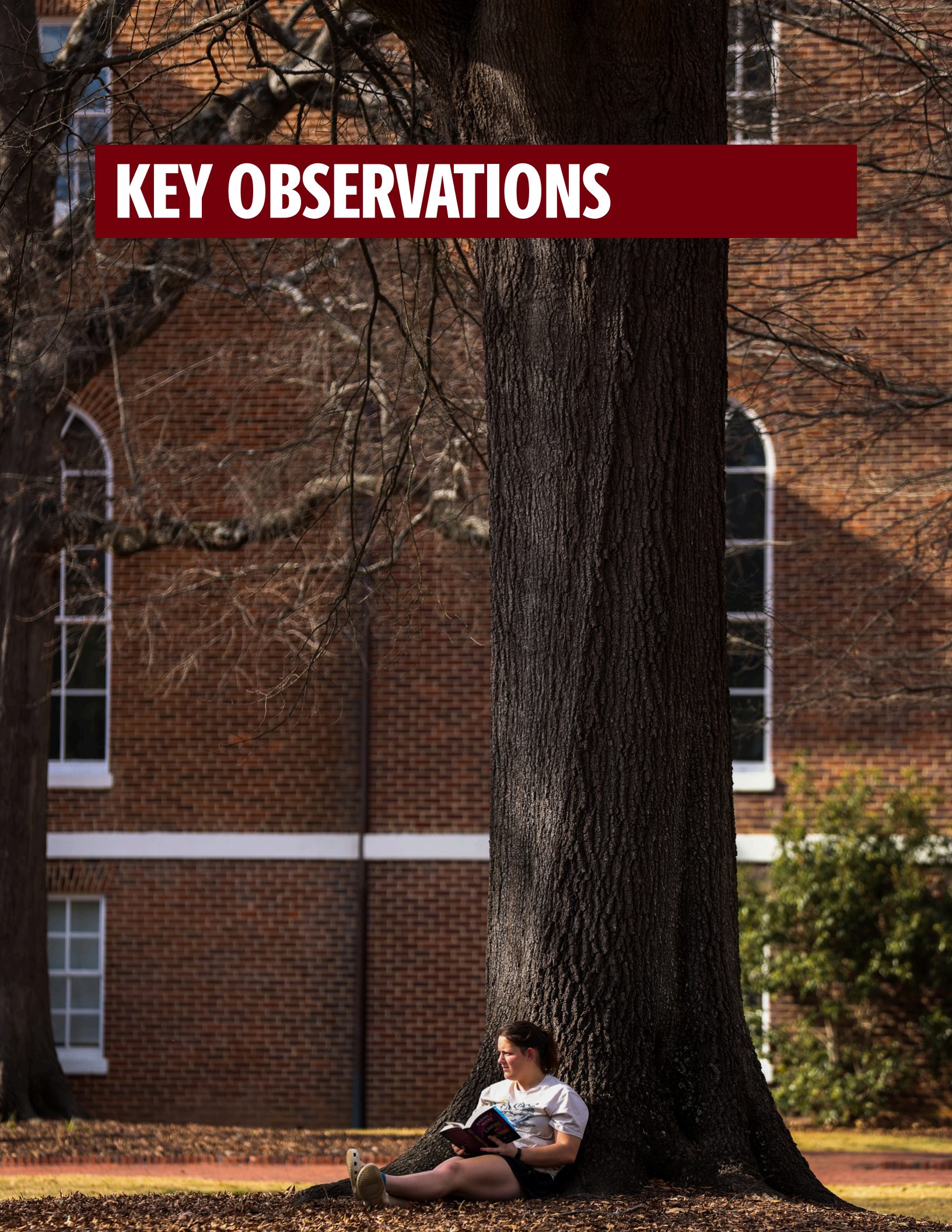
Subcategories for most frequent category of concern

The most frequent category of concern is Evaluative: encompassed questions, concerns, issues or inquiries arising between people in evaluative relationships, such as supervisor-employee.

For this category, the Staff Ombuds recorded visitor concerns in 11 subcategories: respect, trust and integrity, communication and feedback, bullying and harassment, retaliation, assignments and schedules, performance and evaluation, department climate, supervisor effectiveness, equitable treatment as well as insubordination.



KEY OBSERVATIONS



SYSTEMIC PATTERNS OF CONCERN

Unclear classification and compensation processes

A popular concern voiced by visitors across seven university units pertained to fair, competitive compensation in their unit for themselves and for others. Visitors expressed their frustration about perceiving themselves as not being paid equitably to others in their department who were doing similar work, often feeling undervalued as a result.

Others expressed frustration that they have not been able to successfully advocate for themselves or for the employees in their units. They voiced frustration about employees being paid less than new hires for the same or similar work and for an inability to fully advocate for higher salaries.

Many of these visitors shared their frustration and confusion around these processes, citing numerous perceived barriers and gatekeepers – human resources department liaisons, supervisors, department directors and central human resources – for fair and timely review of their requests.

HR department liaison conflicting role

A common concern expressed by visitors was the perceived conflicting role of the HR department liaison, who often reported to the director of the department. In these instances, visitors did not feel that the HR liaison was able to represent the employees fairly during times of conflict and dispute.

Return to campus mandate

Numerous individuals visited the Staff Ombuds Office to express their concerns about the return to campus mandate that began July 1. Visitors expressed concern that the landscape of work and service delivery has significantly changed within certain work units, i.e. work functions and customer service delivery take place online only.

They felt that the RTO mandate does not adequately take these changes into account, nor does the mandate consider the unique needs for recruitment, retention and the nature of work for certain divisions. In fact, the mandate may create new barriers to excellent customer service, operational efficiencies, and the recruitment and retention of staff.

SATISFACTION, TRAININGS AND CONCLUSION

Visitor satisfaction

Three out of the four online survey respondents said that they did not talk to anyone about their concerns prior to their visit with the Staff Ombuds, while one respondent considered filing a grievance. Three out of the four online respondents were very satisfied with the services they received, while one respondent was very dissatisfied.

Two comments were submitted:

- "She (Robynn Pease) is very warm and understanding. She really listened to my concerns in a nonjudgmental manner. She went out of her way to follow up with me to see how things were going. I appreciate this level of support. She is a wonderful resource."
- "Ms. Pease was very welcoming and reassuring during my visit. I appreciate her listening, empathy and her suggestions. I appreciate the service that she provides."

Professional training and development

The Staff Ombuds is an active member of the International Ombuds Association (IOA), where she serves as the co-chair of the Professional Development Committee's Webinar/Seminar series.

She also regularly attends a bi-weekly meeting for certified ombuds practitioners of colleges and universities, OSLAC. Professional development for 2024-2025 included attending the IOA annual conferences and IOA September Virtual Symposium.

Additionally, the Staff Ombuds engaged in developing training related to her professional role as ombuds. Trainings and presentations for 2024-25 included "The Power of Impartiality: How Ombuds Offices Help Navigate Conflict and Change" with Tessa Byer (University Ombuds, Clemson University) for the Higher Education Recruitment Consortium (HERC), and "Navigating Conflict in the Multi-Generational Workplace" for the USC campus communities.

Conclusion

The Staff Ombuds has identified the following initiatives for 2025-2026:

- Website resources for dealing with conflict and improving communication.
- Establishment of a university ombuds charter.
- Development of trainings
    - Defining Dignity and its Essential Role in Resolving Conflict
    - The Psychological Aspect of Retirement Planning (in partnership with HR Organizational and Professional Development)