

**OFFICE OF THE UNIVERSITY OMBUDS**

# **ANNUAL REPORT**

**JULY 1, 2019 - JUNE 30, 2020**

For: Syracuse University Community



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# INTRODUCTION

This serves as the 2019-20 annual individual report from Syracuse University Ombuds Neal Powless. The report includes data from July 2019 - June 2020 covering the summer, fall and spring semesters. This is the first complete year of operations that will encapsulate all work done for the fiscal year period.

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. At that time, 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.

The Office of the University Ombuds acts as a neutral, independent informal and confidential resource for Syracuse University faculty, staff and graduate students who are seeking assistance to resolve questions and concerns. The Office of the University Ombuds helps further promote a respectful and ethical campus community in line with the University’s values and policies.

Appointed in January 2019, Neal Powless is no stranger to the Syracuse University community. From 2011-15, he served as assistant director of the Native Student Program in the Office of Multicultural Affairs. Prior to that, Powless was a career counselor with the Center for Career Services. He is currently a Ph.D. candidate in the Newhouse School, where his research is centered on Indigenous imagery in contemporary film. He earned a bachelor’s degree in psychology at Nazareth College and a master’s degree in counseling at Syracuse University. Powless is also a Nationally Certified Counselor.

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“ *It was an absolute pleasure meeting you and I am very glad the University has created the ombuds office and hired you to lead the efforts.* ”

INTRODUCTORY MEETING VISITOR

# ACCOMPLISHMENTS

In 2019-2020, the Office of the University Ombuds has:

- Continued University outreach and presentations throughout the campus.
- Developed marketing materials, updated website with information and photographs.
- Continued to update/create reference resources for the ombuds.
- Completed a professional development conflict training module that is presented through Human Resources and the Wellness Center.
- Increased individual and group interactions from every part of the University, providing extensive guidance in unique cases.
- Expanded presentations, assessments and trainings for groups.
- Observed a rise in facilitated conversations and workshops for individuals, organizations and teams in turmoil.
- Designed and quickly implemented a COVID-19 operations shift to allow for “live interactions” for personal connection with all visitors who call into the office.
- Expanded its services to undergraduate students during the shift to online work due to COVID-19.

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“ I am so grateful to you for the time you took to meet with me this morning. The information you provided was so helpful and has made me feel more optimistic and confident about the month ahead. ”

ANONYMOUS VISITOR

# OBSERVED TRENDS

During the reporting period, the Office of the University Ombuds has observed the following through interaction with its visitors.

1. Exploitation and poor communication with subordinates at all levels through power dynamics with those in supervisor roles.
2. Systemic concerns around sexist and racist comments throughout the campus.
3. Some departments are engaging in or have created an unhealthy work environment due to conflict.
4. Inconsistency between advisors, with some not being responsive, or a perception of discrimination.
5. Visitors continue to express fear of retaliation from someone else within the University.

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“ Thank you so much for meeting with us yesterday. I greatly appreciated your calm and wise advice, which helped me to be more reflective and hopefully more strategic in my work in the future. Also thanks very much for sharing your conflict styles slides with me. I’ve gone through the slides and found them very helpful in understanding different styles and multiple perspectives. ”

ANONYMOUS VISITOR

## IN SUMMARY

Before the global health crisis broke, Syracuse University was experiencing massive transitions. With any change, there are opportunities to grow into areas of mutual reciprocity and respect, by embracing and practicing the two essential skills of active listening and empathy. This takes an effort on everyone's part within the Syracuse University community.

The majority of the data, trends and issues outlined in this report (and those not shared here,) are concerns that can be traced back to a lack of empathy. Not to be confused with sympathy or apathy, empathy is showing another individual an effort to understand their experience. This can be achieved through actively listening.

As Syracuse University transitions back to campus during a time of great uncertainty, the ability to show compassion for each other is vital. When tensions are high and you feel pressured, it is easy to speak quickly and without kindness. Doing better will take time, practice and dedication on everyone's part. By speaking thoughtfully to your fellow Syracuse University community members and, when necessary, apologizing for the tone of your quick responses, it will be easier to work through this unknown time feeling supported by each other.

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“ It was refreshing, and moving, to hear how much of your story and passion you bring to your role at the University. I'm confident it will translate to positive outcomes for this community. ”

REFLECTION FROM PRESENTATION

# DATA

## Visitor Interactions

**230**

Introductory meetings

**73**

Presentations to faculty, staff,  
organizations and groups

**1,802**

Individuals reached through  
group participation

**255**

Cases

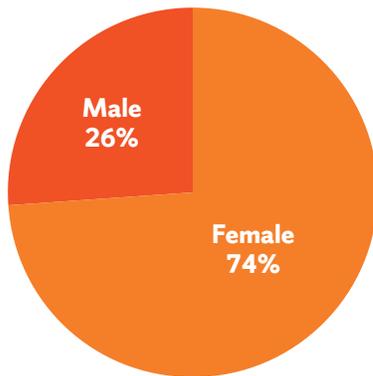
**284**

Individuals reached

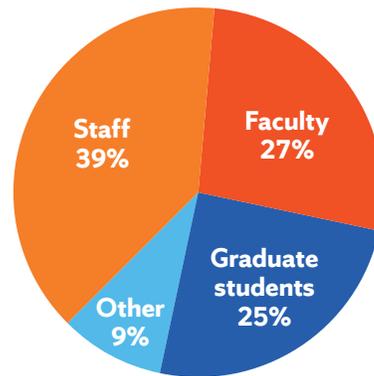
**18**

Facilitated conversations

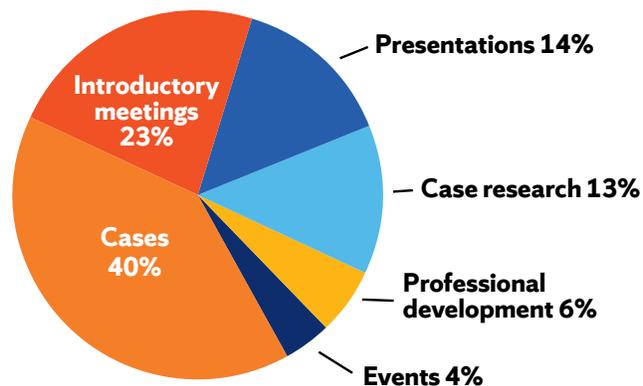
## Cases by Demographics



## Cases by Status



## Ombuds Time Breakdown

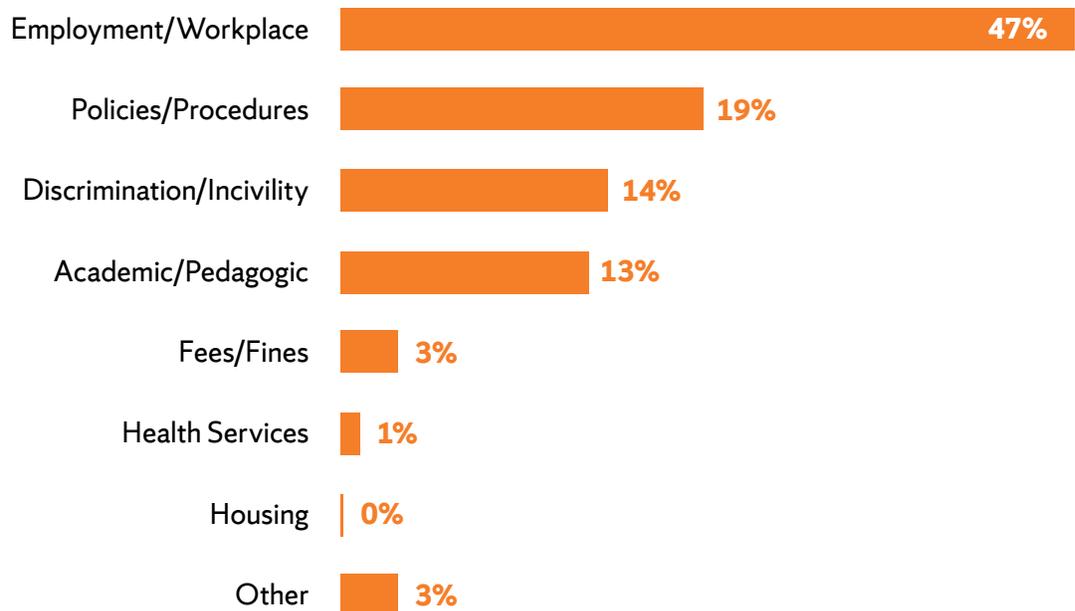


# DATA

## Systemic Categories Raised



## Nature of Concerns



# APPENDIX

## Five Common Questions About the University Ombuds Office

### 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:
  - i. assisting in clarifying university policies;
  - ii. helping evaluate options for conflict resolution;
  - iii. referring visitors to the right resources;
  - iv. 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.