

Introduction

This annual report provides a comprehensive overview of the operations of the Ombuds Office for Students & Postdoctoral Appointees (hereinafter referred to as the “Ombuds Office” or “Office”). It encompasses a detailed analysis of the Office’s activities throughout the year, including:

- **Quantitative data:** The report presents data on the volume of visitors to the Ombuds Office, offering insights into the utilization of its services by students and postdoctoral appointees (postdocs). This data includes demographic information to better understand the composition of individuals seeking assistance.
- **Qualitative analysis:** Beyond mere numbers, the report delves into the nature of concerns brought forward by visitors. This analysis explores the types of issues encountered by students and postdocs, shedding light on the challenges they face in their academic and professional journeys.
- **Actionable recommendations:** Based on the quantitative and qualitative findings, the report culminates in a set of recommendations aimed at addressing the identified concerns and improving the overall experience of students and postdoctoral appointees. These recommendations, found at the conclusion of the report, are intended to guide institutional policies and practices.

Undergraduate student visitors accounted for 56% of all student visitors and 39% of all visitors.



Graduate student visitors were 44% of all student visitors and 31% of all visitors.

Mission

The Ombuds Office serves as an informal dispute resolution resource that advocates for equality, fairness, justice, respect for differences, and reasonable solutions to the issues and concerns of the student and postdoctoral appointee populations at UC Berkeley.

Principles of Practice

The Ombuds Office follows the International Ombuds Association's standards of practice and code of ethics, including: *Confidentiality, Independence, Informality, and Neutrality*. The Office also upholds and promotes the UC Berkeley Principles of Community.

Executive Summary

The Ombuds Office saw a record-breaking 274 visitors in 2023-2024, a 17% increase from the previous year and 15% above the five-year average. 36% of visitors required follow-up support, including consultations with campus partners. Student concerns centered on academic progress, communication, grades, interpersonal behavior, and policies. Faculty and staff consultations, often complex, made up 13% of visits.

Data Collection & Reporting

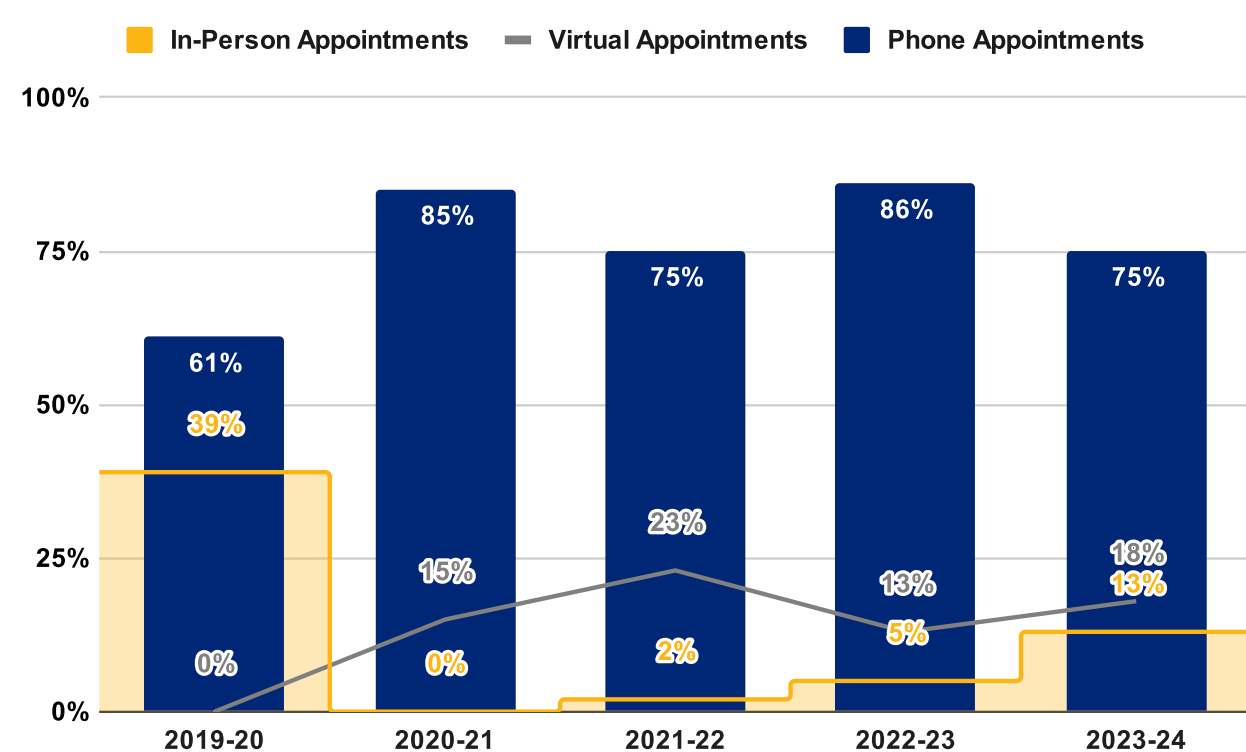
The Ombuds Office gathers data from visitors to identify and analyze trends that may require institutional attention. Visitors can voluntarily and anonymously disclose demographic information, which is not connected to their individual cases. This data is collected solely from students and postdocs, not from those consulting on related matters.

As an informal and confidential resource, the Office prioritizes visitor privacy. While anonymous records of basic demographic and concern information are maintained for historical and reporting purposes, all identifying information is destroyed, ensuring confidentiality.

Visitors' Appointments

While phone appointments remain the overwhelming preference among Ombuds Office visitors, a trend established during the global health crisis in 2020, in-person appointments have seen a steady increase for the third consecutive year.

In-person appointments comprised 13% of all Ombuds Office visits. While this is an increase for the third consecutive year, it remains significantly lower than pre-pandemic levels. The 4% rise in mediations, which are typically conducted in person, may be a contributing factor; however, this must be considered in the context of the overall increase in visitor traffic.



Services

The Ombuds Office provides confidential and impartial support to students and postdocs, guiding them through university processes and conflict resolution. This includes offering resources and information on a wide range of topics, from academic policies to interpersonal disputes. The Office empowers visitors to find solutions that best meet their needs.

Serving the broader university community, the Office assists with student and postdoc-related concerns. This may involve consultations with faculty and staff seeking guidance on how to best support students or navigate challenging situations. 70% of visitors were students, 13% were faculty and staff, and 17% included alumni, parents, and postdocs.

Services for All Visitors

	2023-24
Clarifying Policy/Procedure	59%
Coaching	35%
Referral	20%
Consultation	15%
Mediation	7%
Shuttle Diplomacy	4%
33% of visitors were rendered more than one type of service	

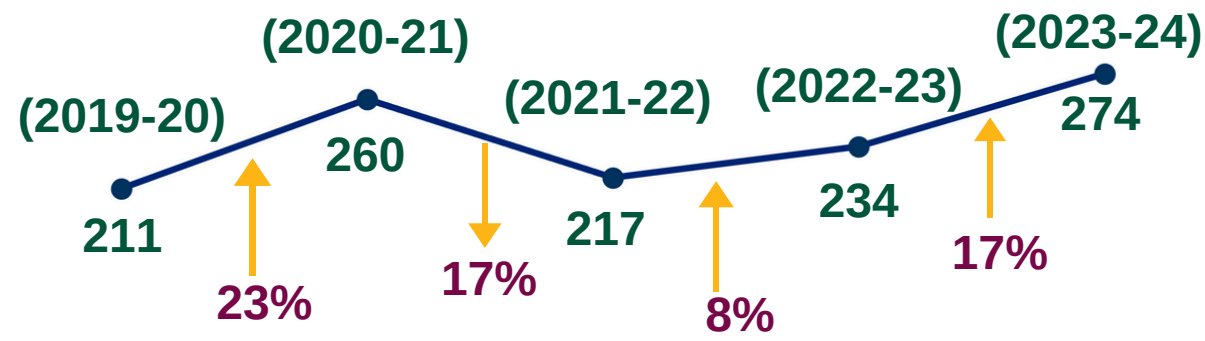
The Ombuds Office is dedicated to fostering fair and impartial outcomes that promote student success, optimize the use of administrative resources, minimize institutional liability, and cultivate an environment aligned with the university's mission, vision, and core values.

In addition to individual appointments, the Office conducted 19 outreach events and training sessions, reaching over 750 undergraduate and graduate students, postdoctoral appointees, faculty, and staff.

As an informal resource, the Ombuds Office operates on the principle of voluntary engagement. It cannot compel individuals or groups to utilize its services; assistance is provided solely upon request.

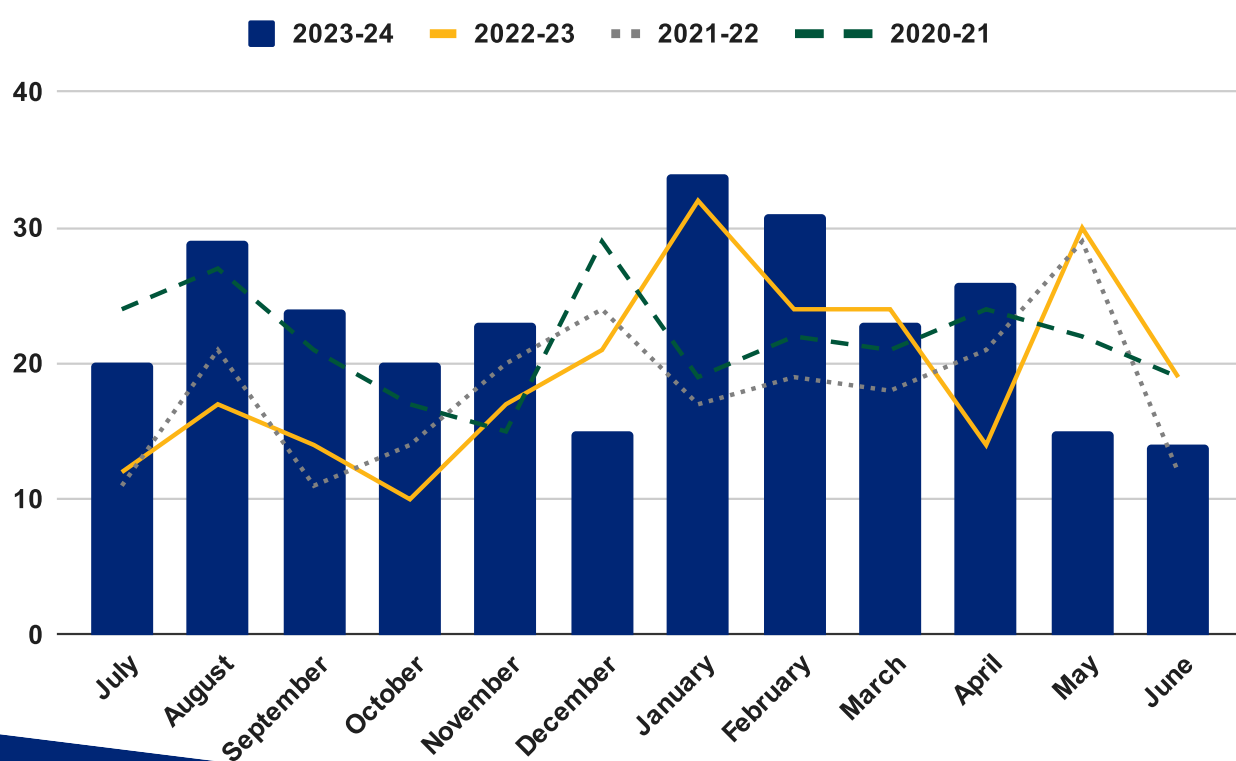
All Visitors

Between July 2023 and June 2024, 274 visitors sought assistance from the Ombuds Office. This 17% increase marks the third time in four years that the Office has experienced an increase in its numbers.

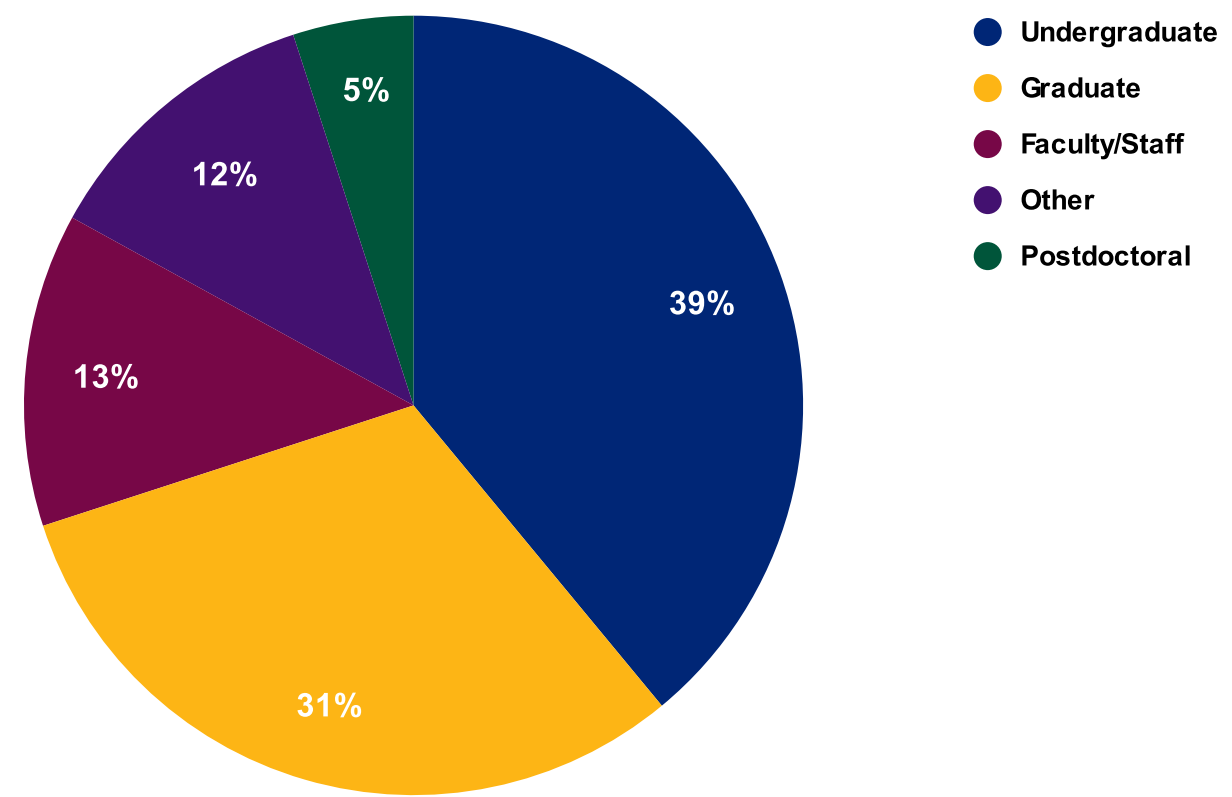


The Ombuds Office has experienced a significant rise in visitor numbers over the past five years. After consistently remaining below 200 visitors annually since it began tracking its numbers in 2008-09, the Office saw a surge beginning in 2019-20, with 211 individuals seeking assistance. This upward trend continued, reaching a peak of 274 visitors in 2023-24. This represents a notable increase and suggests a growing awareness and utilization of the Ombuds Office's services.

Several factors may contribute to this increased traffic. Possible explanations include heightened awareness of conflict resolution resources, a growing need for confidential support within the university, or potentially a shift in the campus culture that encourages seeking assistance for conflict navigation. Further research, such as surveys or exit interviews with visitors, could provide more specific insights into the reasons behind this trend and help the Ombuds Office better understand and respond to the needs of its visitors.

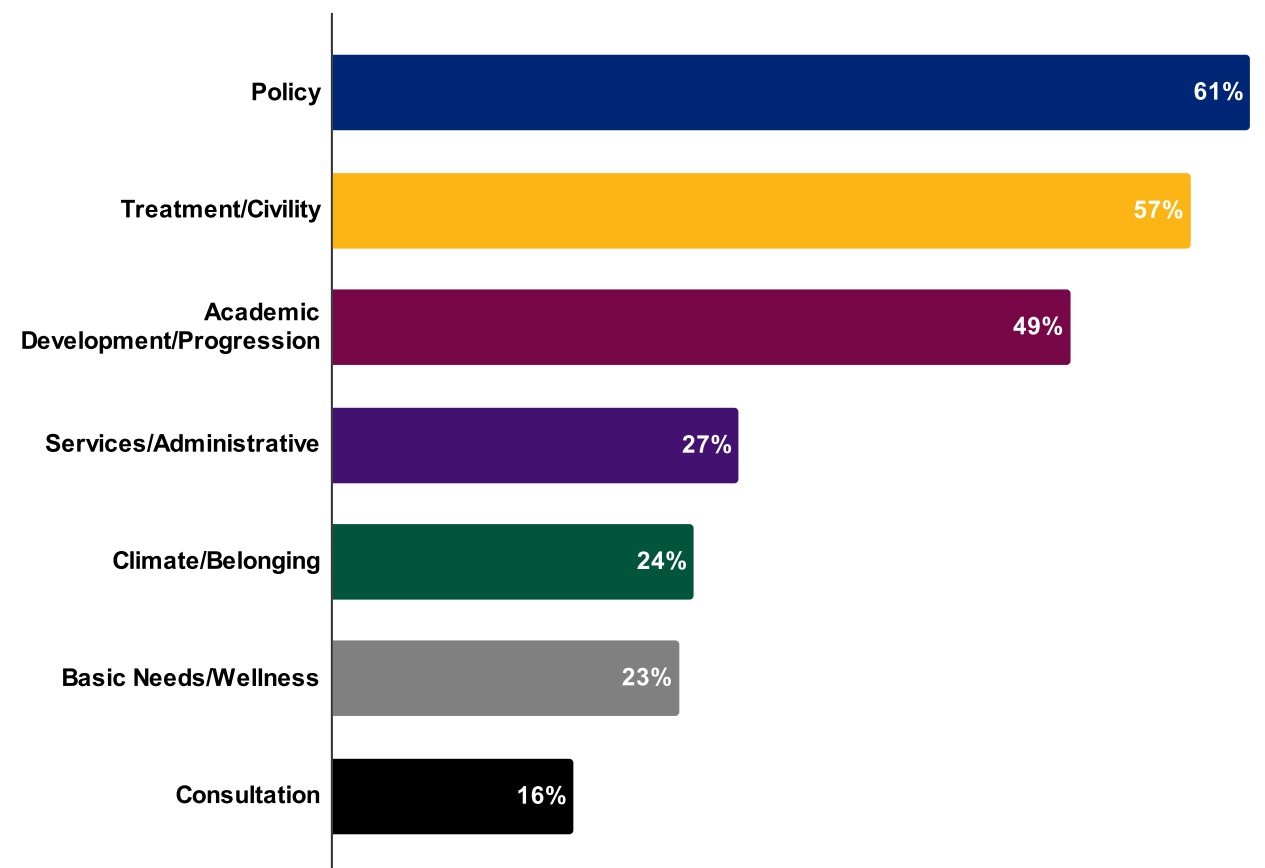


All Visitors Served



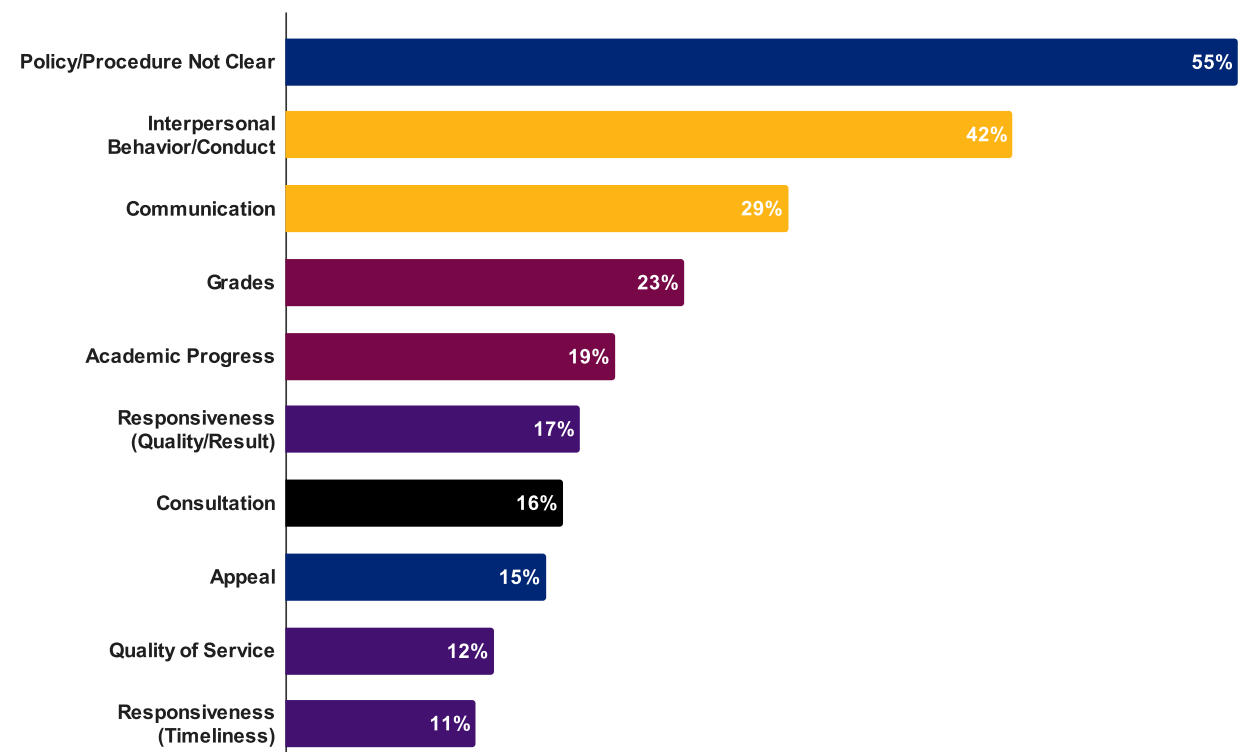
All Visitors Concerns: Main Categories

87% of all visitors reported a concern from more than one main category



All Visitors Concerns: Top 10 Subcategories*

95% of all visitors reported more than one type of concern



*Colors of subcategory concerns correspond with colors of main category concerns

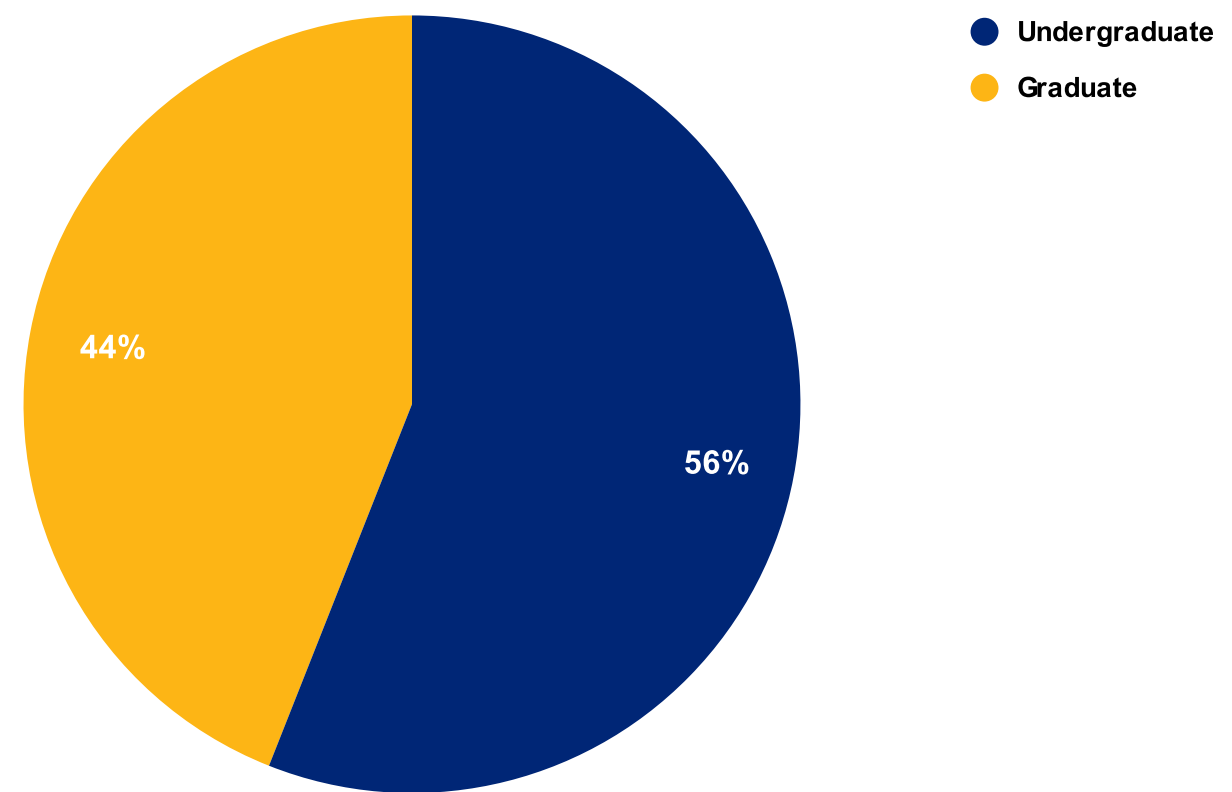
Student Visitors

The Ombuds Office welcomed 274 visitors during the 2023-24 reporting year. Undergraduate and graduate students accounted for 70% of these visits, consistent with the historical average of 76%.

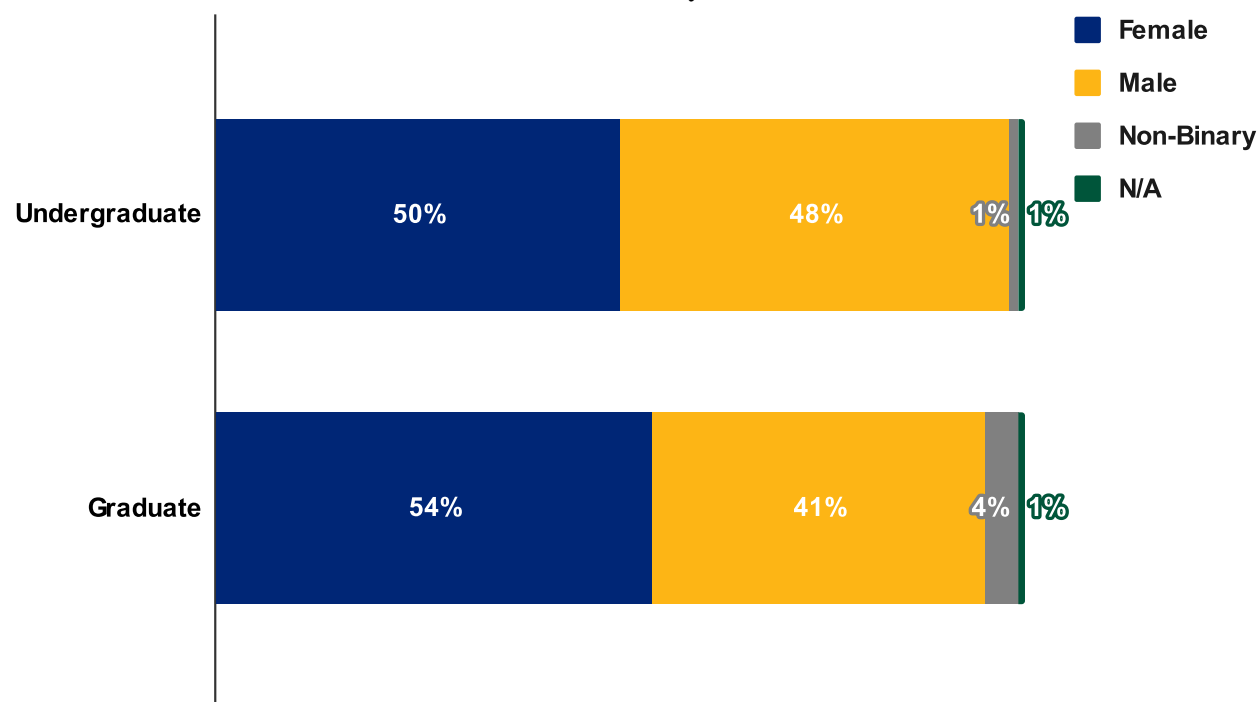
To ensure clarity, this data represents only current students. Alumni and UCBX students are categorized as "Other Visitors."

The Office is committed to inclusivity and collects race/ethnicity data for all visitors, including international students. Campus-wide figures, which do not include race/ethnicity data for international students, were obtained from Cal Answers.

Student Visitors Served

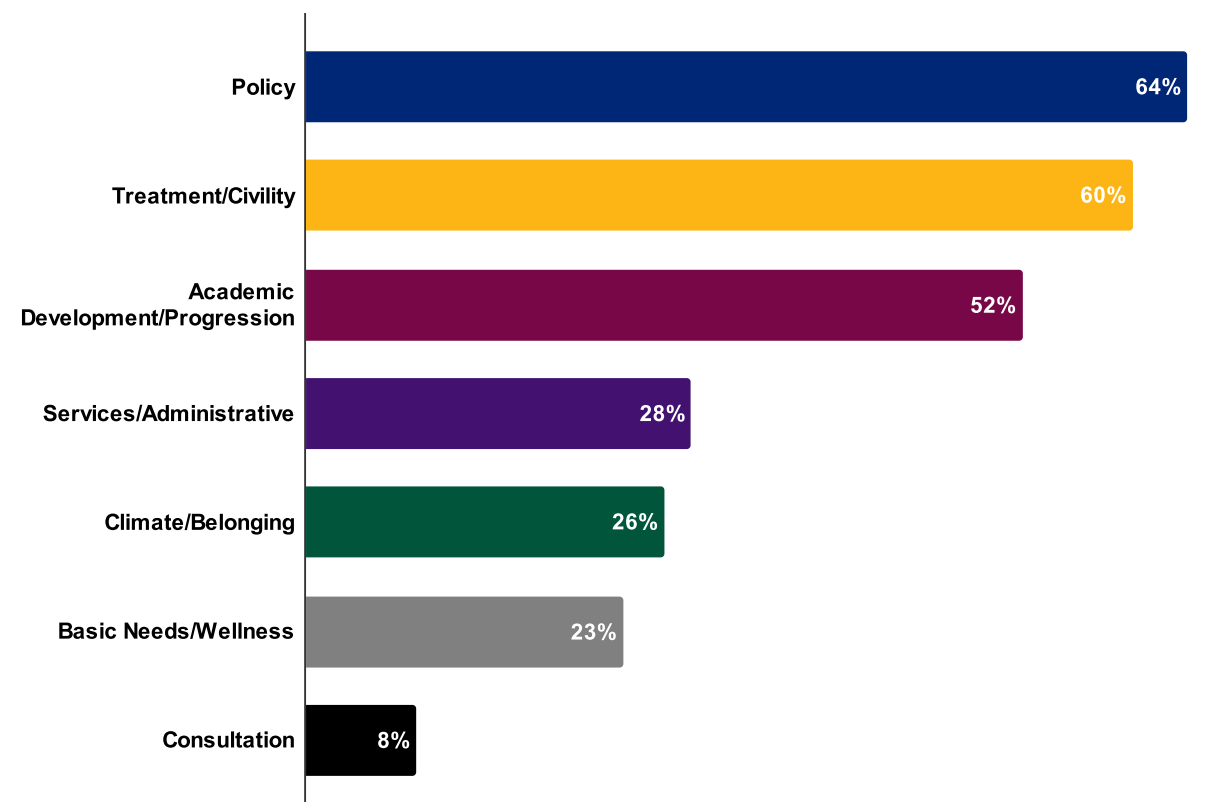


Student Visitors by Gender



All Student Concerns: Main Categories

89% of student visitors reported a concern from more than one main category



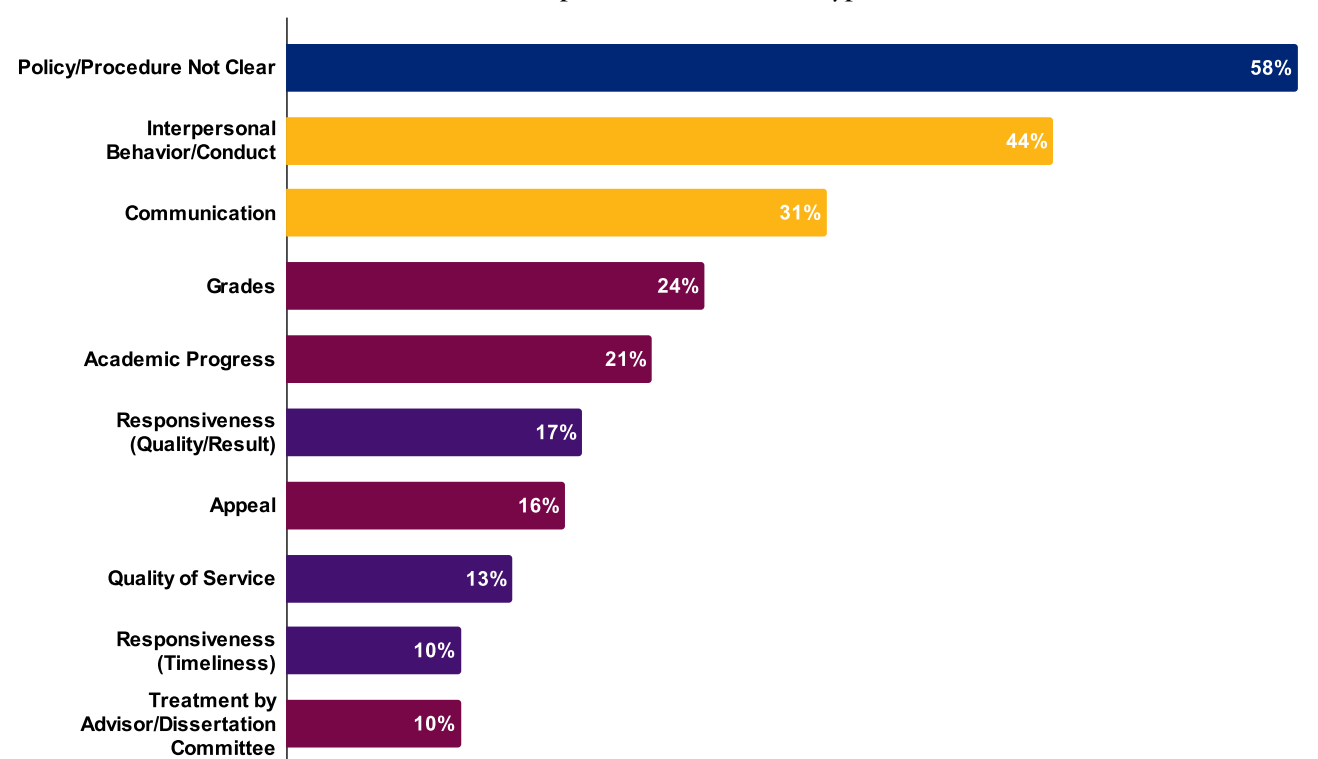
Student Visitors by Race/Ethnicity/National Origin

	Undergraduate Students		Graduate Students	
	23-24	Campus*	23-24	Campus*
Asian/Asian American	28%	39%	20%	29%
Black/African American	6%	4%	7%	7%
Hispanic/Latinx	17%	20%	15%	12%
Native American/Alaska Native	4%	1%	0%	2%
Pacific Islander	3%	1%	4%	1%
South Asian/Southwest Asian/North African	32%	5%	15%	4%
White/Caucasian	29%	27%	46%	40%
Other	26%	N/A	18%	N/A
Declined to State/Unknown	2%	3%	0%	6%

34% of undergraduate student visitors identified as more than one race/ethnicity/national origin
 24% of graduate student visitors identified as more than one race/ethnicity/national origin
 *Campus figures are averages of Fall/Spring enrollment data obtained from Cal Answers
 Per UC and federal reporting guidelines, race/ethnicity of international students is not counted in campus figures

All Student Concerns: Top 10 Subcategories*

95% of student visitors reported more than one type of concern



*Colors of subcategory concerns correspond with colors of main category concerns

Undergraduate Student Visitors

Undergraduate students continued to be the most frequent visitors to the Ombuds Office, comprising 39% of all visitors and 56% of all students. Their concerns largely mirrored historical trends, with grade disputes with faculty members being the most common reason for seeking assistance. These discussions often expanded into broader conversations about relevant campus policies and procedures, particularly those related to grade appeals and policy exception requests.

Phone appointments remain a popular choice for undergraduate students seeking assistance from the Ombuds Office. 86% of undergraduates utilized this method, compared to 61% of graduate students and 75% of all visitors (see p. 2). This preference aligns with the nature of undergraduate inquiries, which often focus on understanding campus policies and procedures—information effectively conveyed over the phone.

Undergraduate Student Parties Involved

	2023-24
Faculty	44%
Department	19%
Student	18%
Policy	8%
Other	4%
Graduate Student Instructor	3%
Staff	3%
Faculty (Adjunct/Visiting)	1%
1% of undergraduate visitors identified more than one party	

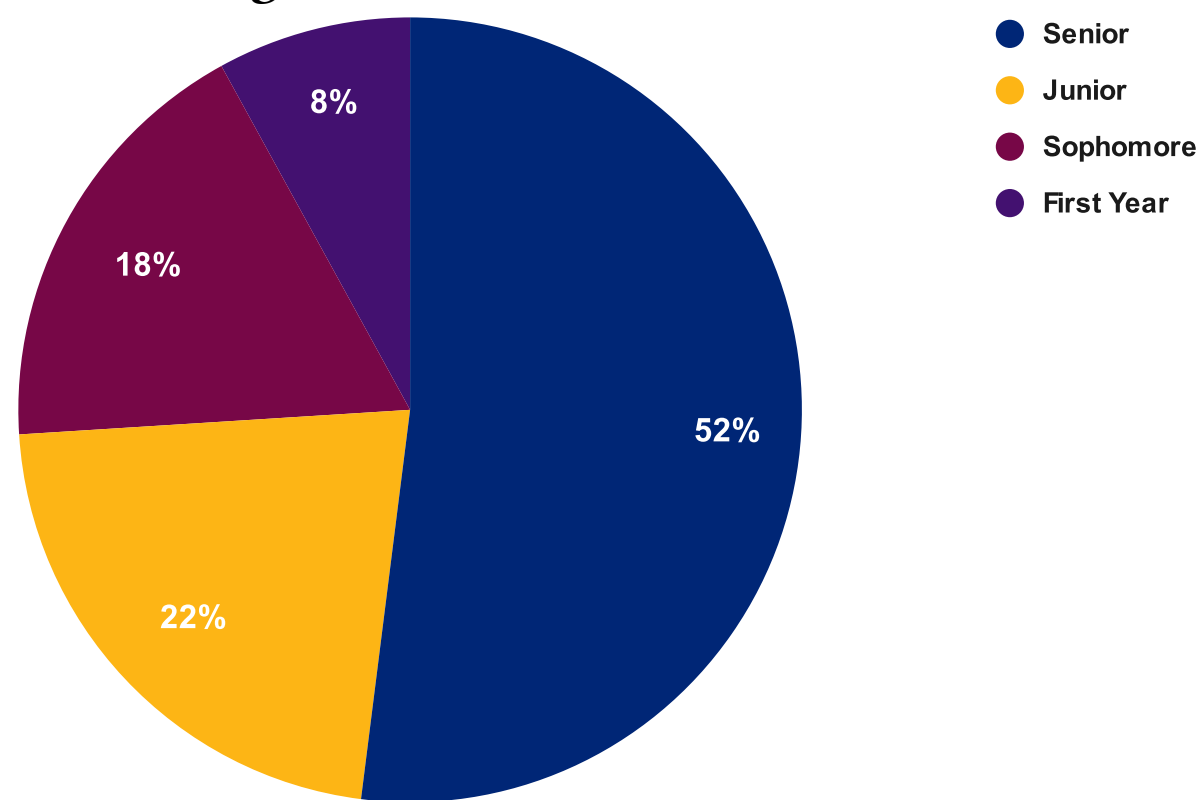
31%

Undergraduate Student Visitors that received Follow-up

2%

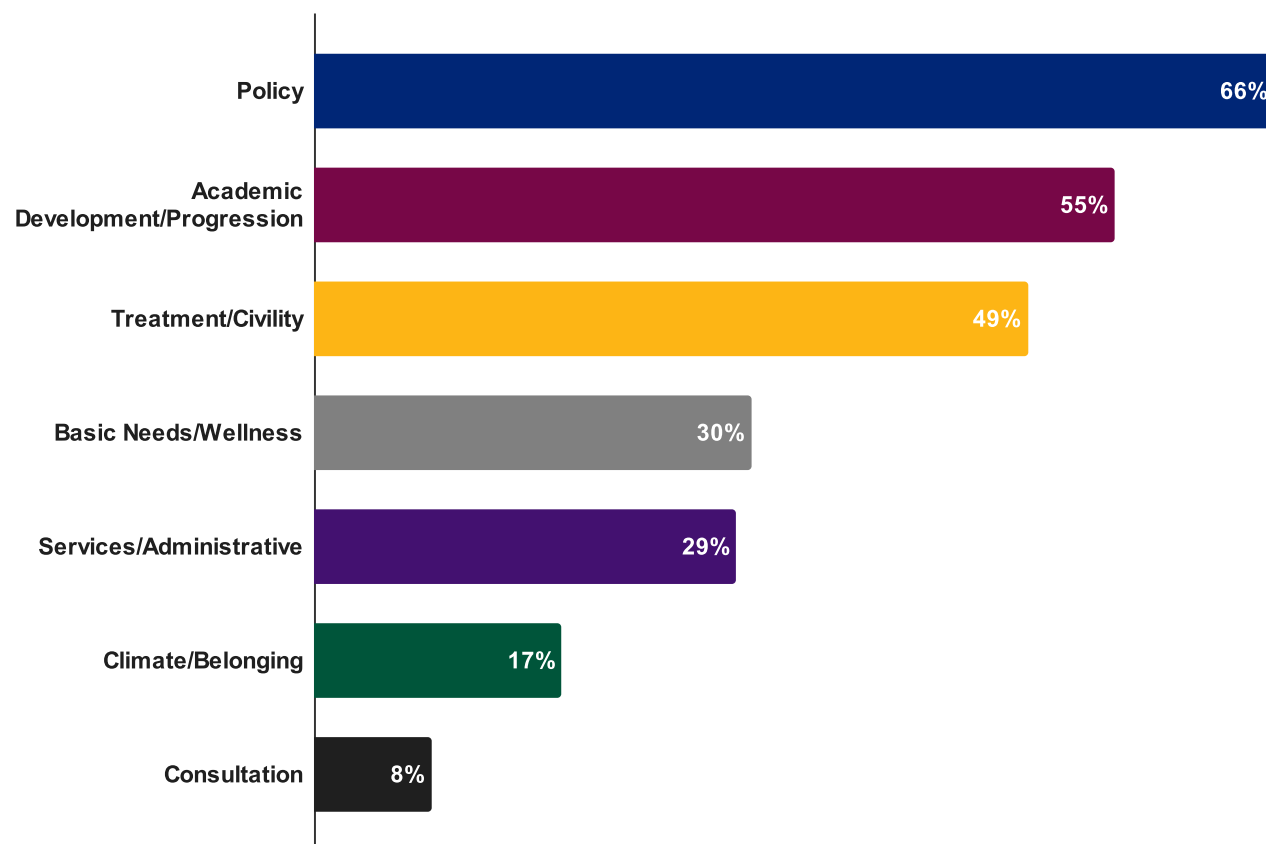
Undergraduate Student Visitors that received a Facilitated Resolution

Undergraduate Student Visitors Served



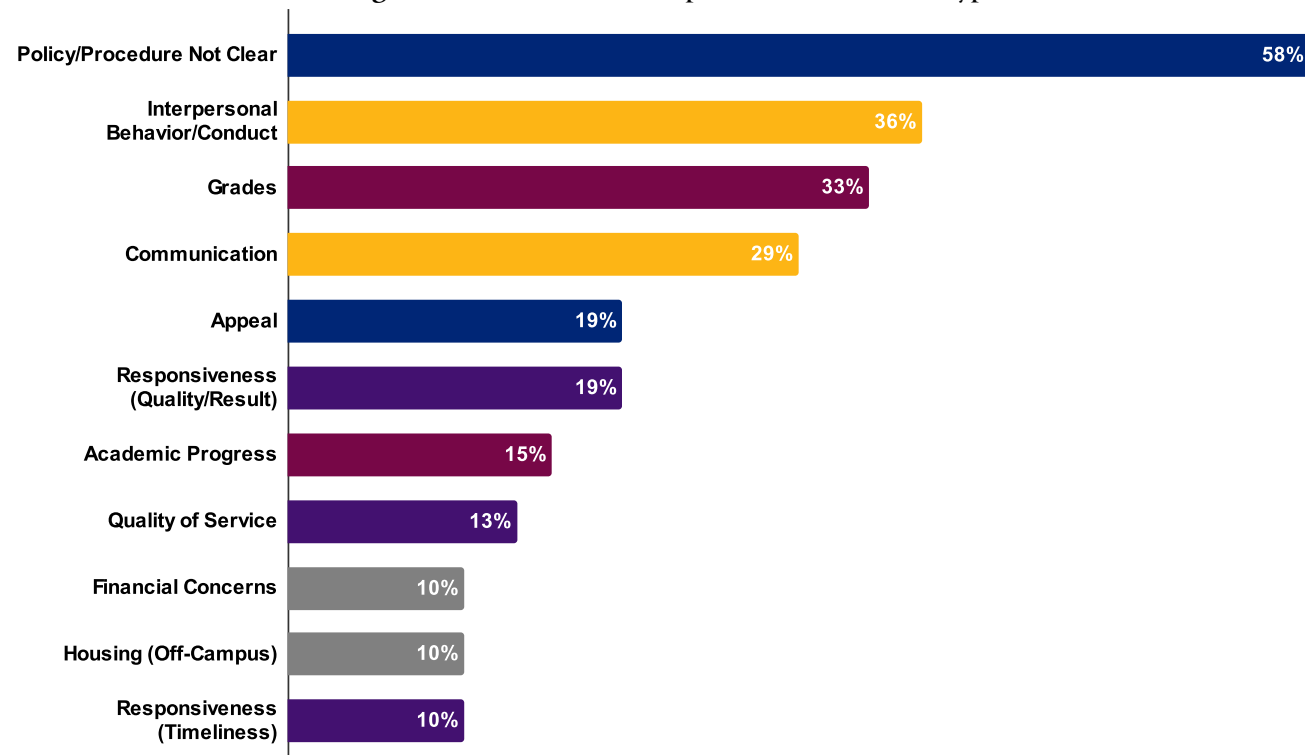
Undergraduate Student Concerns: Main Categories

92% of undergraduate student visitors reported a concern from more than one main category



Undergraduate Student Concerns: Top 10 Subcategories*

95% of undergraduate student visitors reported more than one type of concern



*Colors of subcategory concerns correspond with colors of main category concerns

Graduate Student Visitors

Graduate student engagement with the Ombuds Office increased in 2023-24, both in overall numbers and as a percentage of total visitors. Concerns regarding treatment and civility also rose, from 69% to 73%. Notably, the Office observed an almost 20% increase in graduate students seeking information about campus policies and procedures (see table, bottom right). While communication and interpersonal issues remained typical concerns for graduate students, this rise in policy/procedure inquiries is noteworthy. The Office speculates that this increase may be linked to the natural ebb and flow of concerns, as well as heightened curiosity of formal reporting options following geo-political events occurring in October 2023, the effects of which reverberated throughout the academic year.

It is important to note that graduate student cases often involve complex dynamics within long-term academic relationships. Compared to undergraduate cases, they are more likely to necessitate follow-up and facilitated resolutions like mediation.

Graduate Student Parties Involved

	2023-24
Faculty	36%
Department	24%
Student	23%
Policy	6%
Postdoctoral Appointee	5%
Lab	4%
Staff	2%
Other	>1%

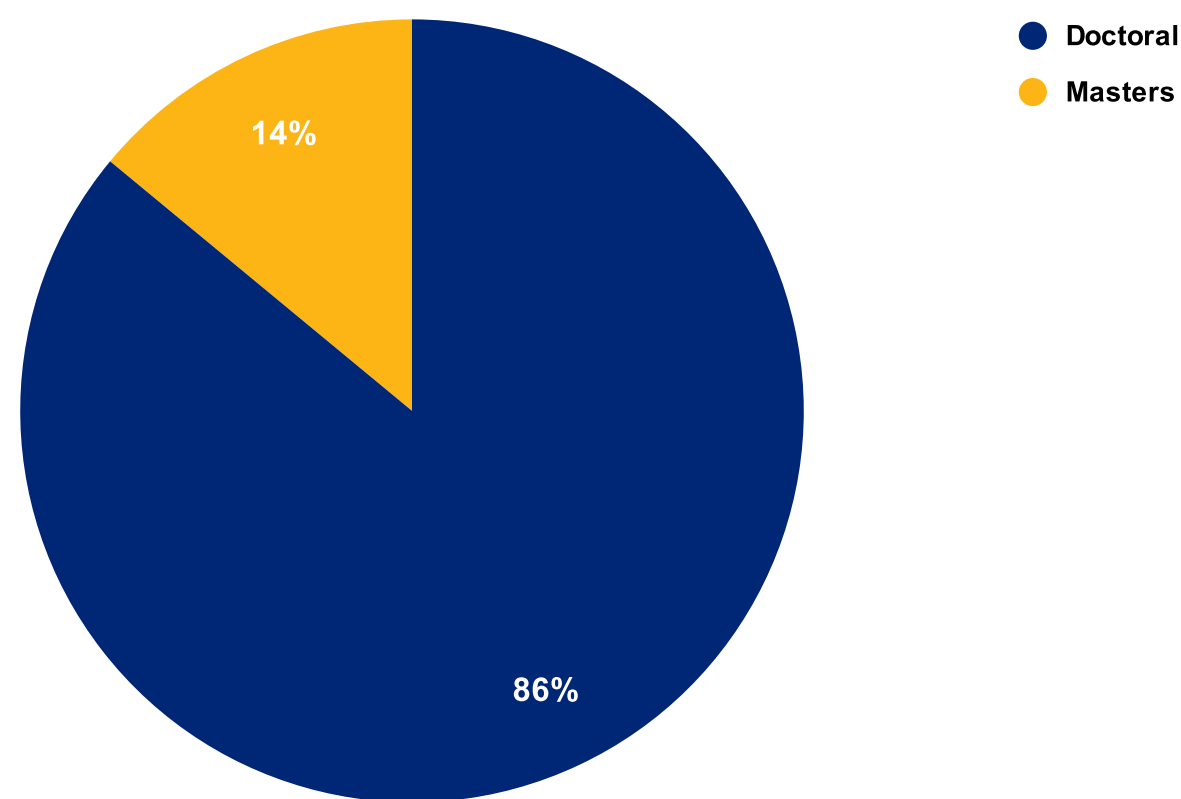
46%

Graduate Student Visitors that received Follow-up

15%

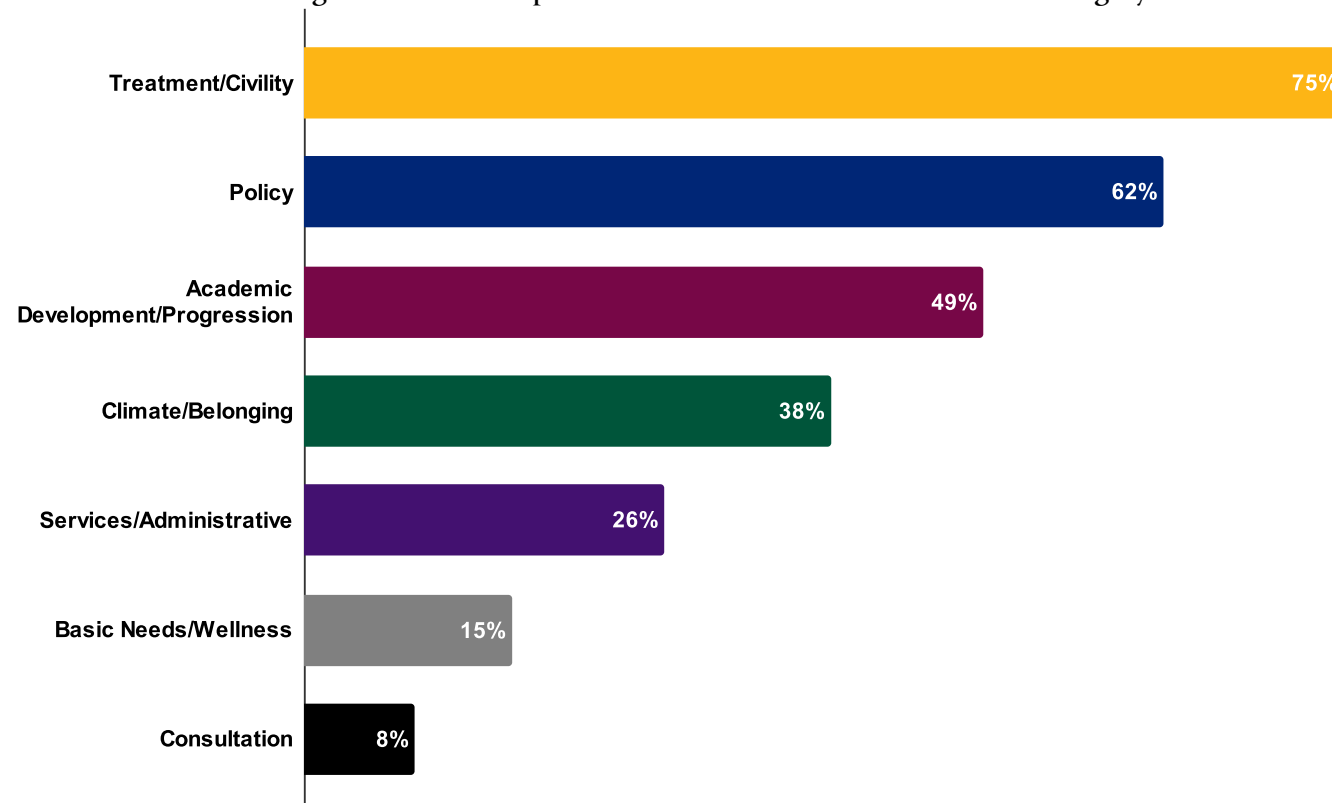
Graduate Student Visitors that received a Facilitated Resolution

Graduate Student Visitor Served



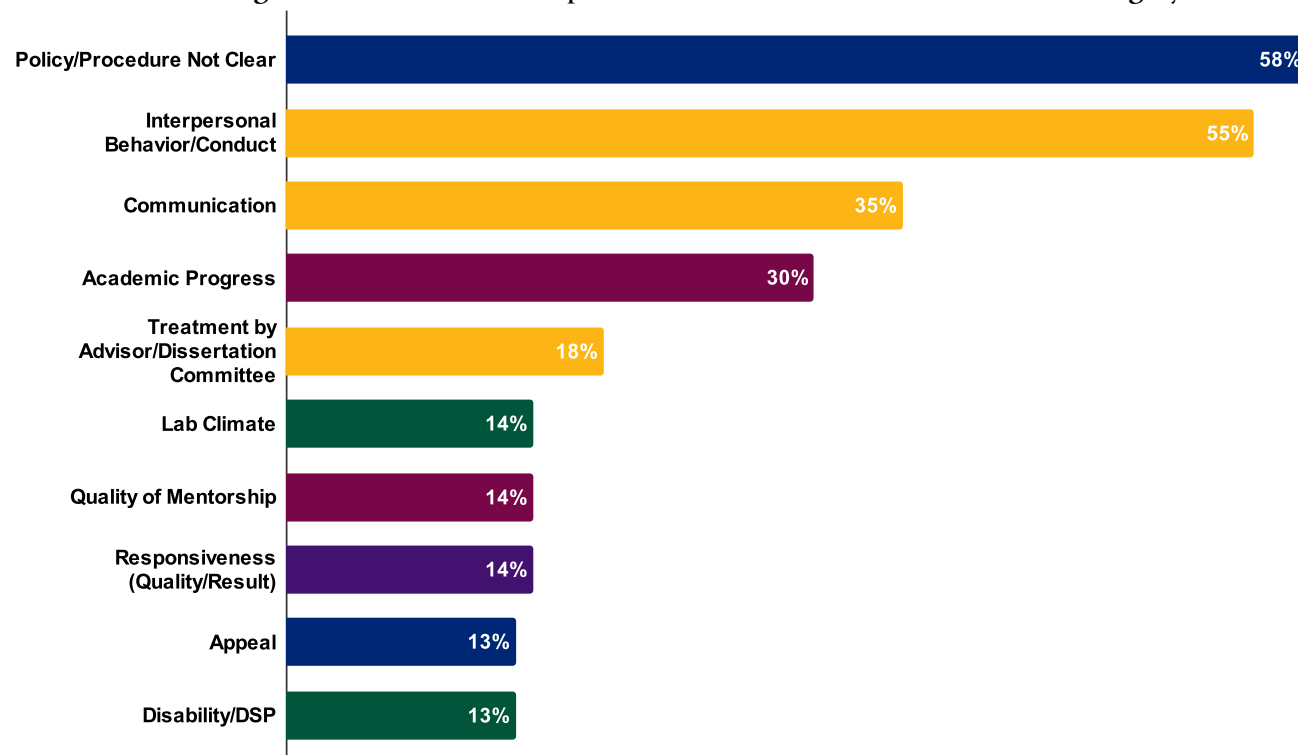
Graduate Student Concerns: Main Categories

90% of graduate visitors reported a concern from more than one main category



Graduate Student Concerns: Top 10 Subcategories*

94% of graduate student visitors reported a concern from more than one main category



*Colors of subcategory concerns correspond with colors of main category concerns

Other Visitors

For the purposes of this report, the category of "Other Visitors" encompasses individuals with past, present, or future affiliations with the university who are not currently enrolled as degree-seeking students. This includes alumni, postdocs, and UCBX students. This population constituted 30% of all visitors to the Ombuds Office during the reporting period. The Ombuds Office provides assistance to all visitors; however, the specific services offered may vary depending on the individual's relationship to the university. All matters presented to the office must pertain to the visitor's past, present, or anticipated association with the university as a student or postdoc.

A notable group within the "Other Visitors" category is alumni, which for this report includes both graduates and those who did not complete a degree at UC Berkeley. While some alumni have not attended the university for many years, many are recent graduates with unresolved issues, often related to grade disputes.* Alumni often present with concerns similar to those of current students, though their needs may vary.

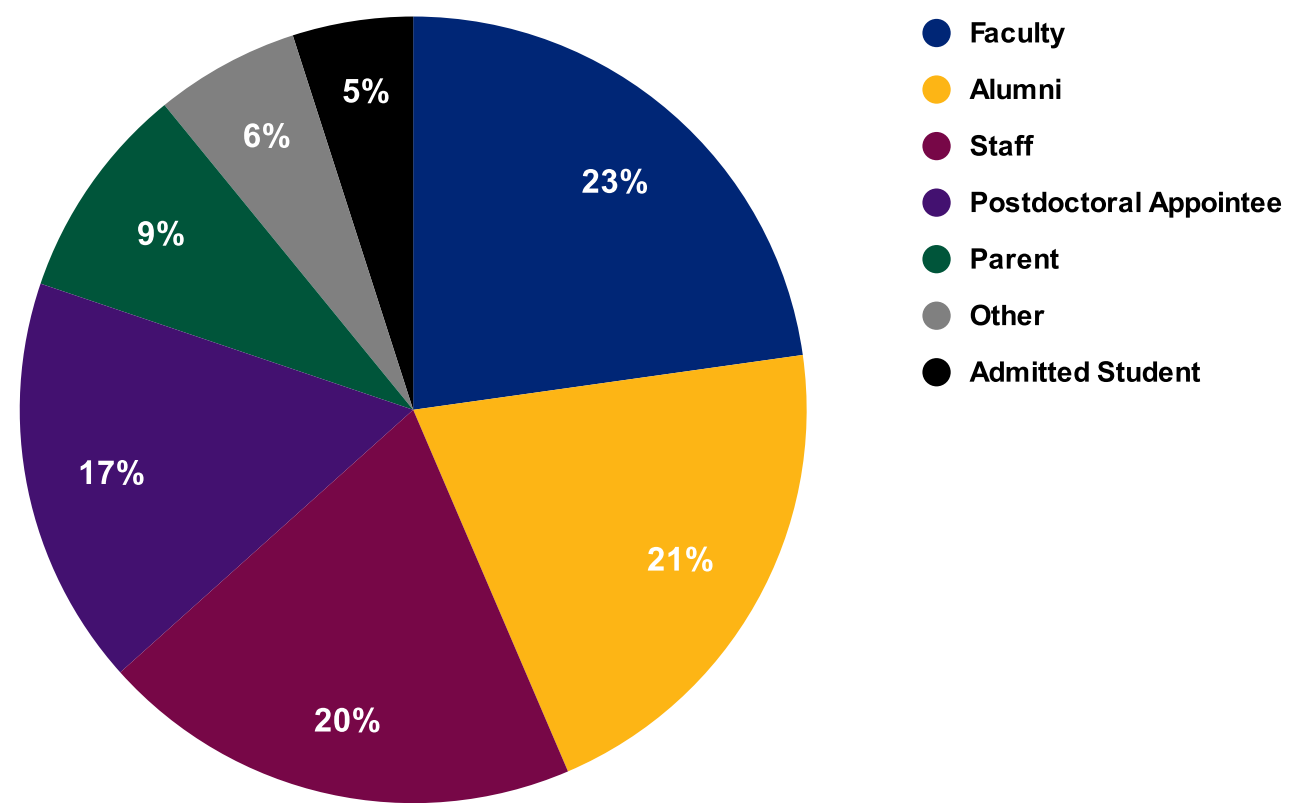
Though included in its title, the Ombuds Office often serves a population that can be easily overlooked: postdocs. Like graduate students, postdocs can be particularly vulnerable due to their reliance on positive relationships with their principal investigators (PIs). This year, postdocs comprised 5% of visitors to the office, slightly exceeding the five-year average of 3%.

Parties Involved for Other Visitors

	2023-24
Student	39%
Faculty	22%
Department	16%
Policy	13%
Other	4%
Staff	4%
GSI	1%
Postdoctoral Appointee	1%

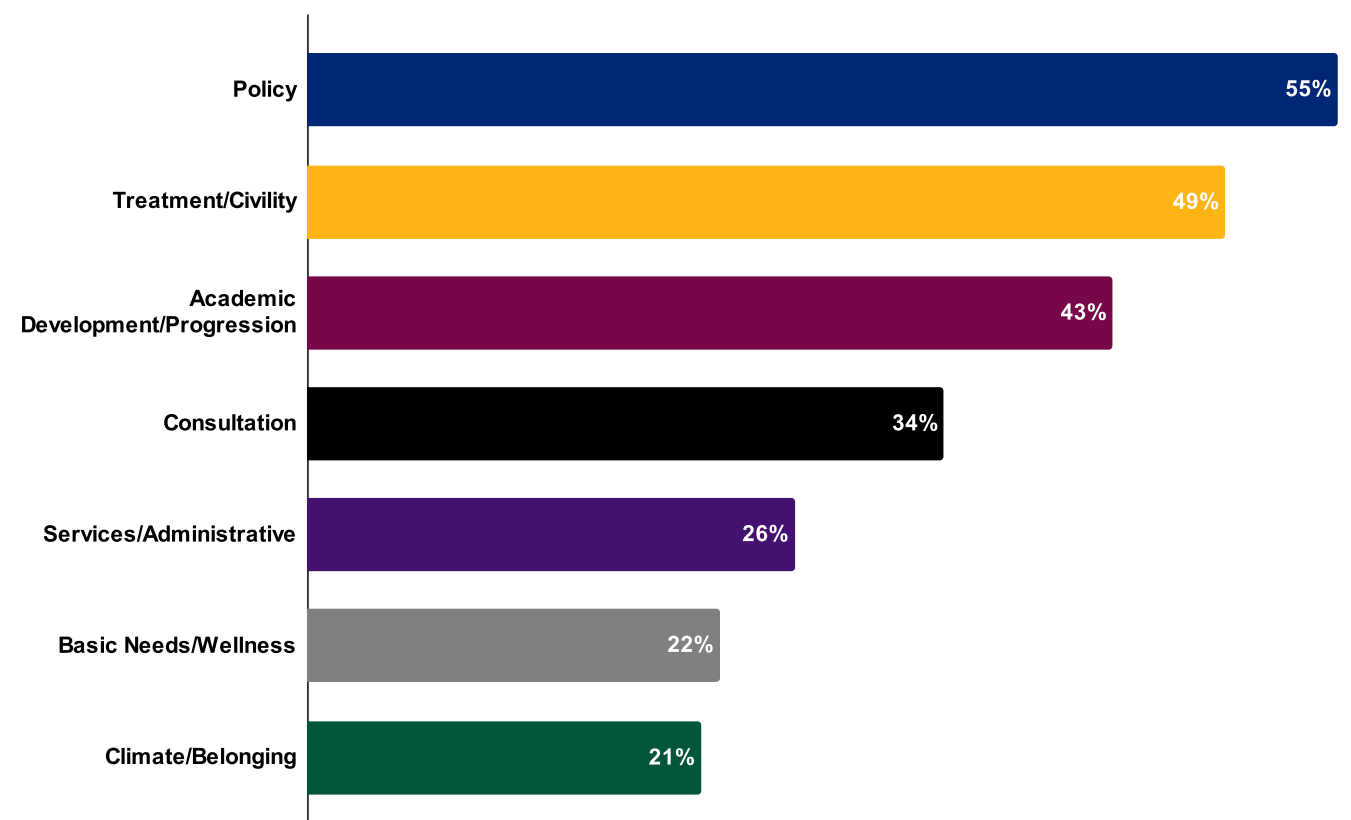
*The Academic Senate *Procedures for Grade Appeals* policy provides students one year to initiate the grade grievance process. This is a formal process that is facilitated by the academic department home to the course in question. Students are not precluded by graduation from participating.

Other Visitors Served



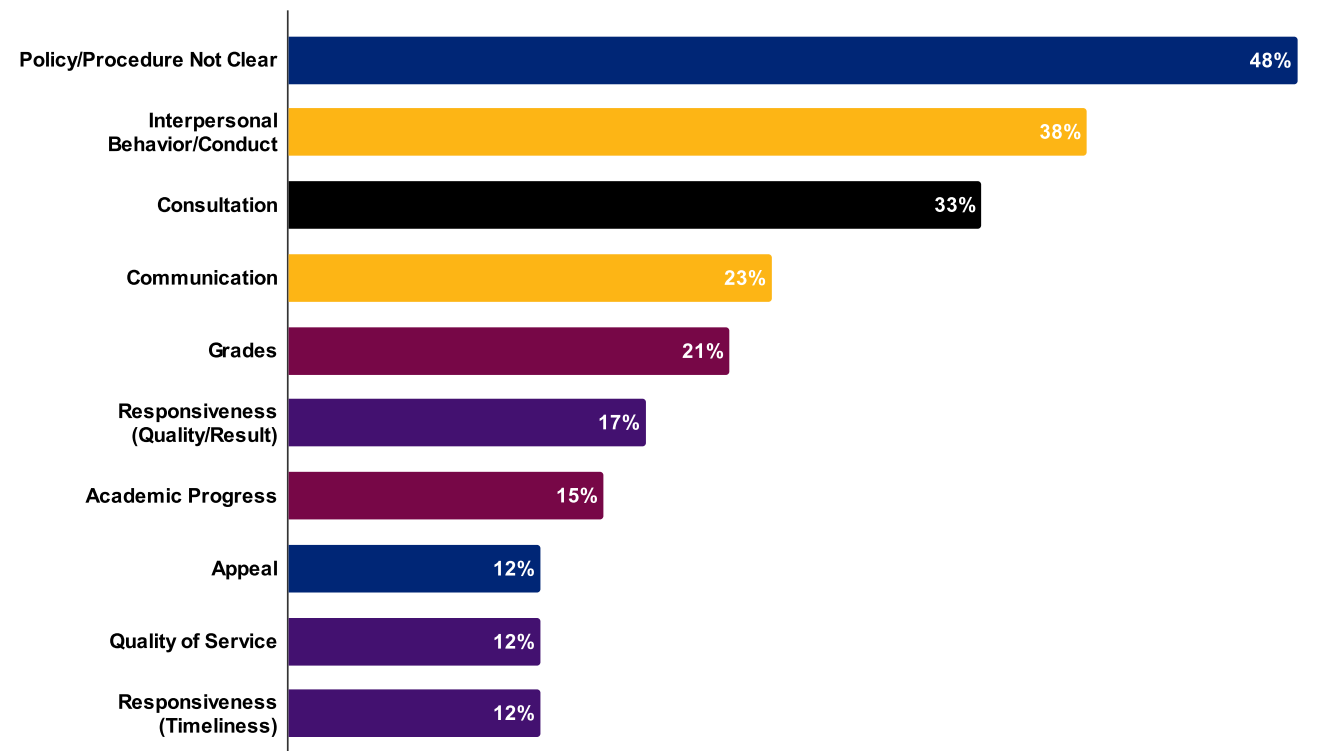
Other Visitor Concerns: Main Categories

83% of other visitors reported a concern from more than one main category



Other Visitor Concerns: Top 10 Subcategories*

93% of other visitors reported a concern from more than one main category



*Colors of subcategory concerns correspond with colors of main category concerns

Recommendations

Informed by observations of the campus community and the concerns brought forward by visitors over the past year, the Ombuds Office offers the following recommendations. While individual visitor concerns may not always indicate systemic issues, they can highlight areas for improvement and inform university leadership in policy and procedural decisions. These recommendations aim to enhance the experiences of students and postdocs.

- **A review of campus procedures to guarantee that all students and postdocs are afforded a fair and transparent process when facing disciplinary action, including potential removal from a registered student organization.**

- This recommendation stems from the Ombuds Office's observation of multiple incidents where both students and postdocs reported being disciplined based solely on accusations without a proper process for addressing the allegations or presenting their account of events. While universities retain the authority to discipline students for legitimate violations of policy or law, it is imperative that these actions are conducted in a manner that respects the individuals right to due process.
- Due process, at its core, is the right to a fair and impartial proceeding before any judgment is rendered or sanctions imposed. This fundamental right includes being informed of the charges, having the opportunity to present evidence, and ensuring an impartial hearing. To deny due process undermines individual rights and erodes trust in the university's commitment to fairness and justice.
- Administrators, faculty, and student leaders all share a responsibility to uphold due process in all aspects of student life, including within student organizations. To ensure these rights are protected, a review of current procedures should prioritize transparency, fairness, and clear communication. This proactive approach will foster a campus environment where individual rights are respected, accountability is maintained, and all members of the community feel valued and treated fairly.

- **Increased transparency regarding the outcome statistics of formal university procedures**

- To empower students and postdocs to make informed decisions about resolving concerns, the Ombuds Office recommends increased transparency regarding the outcome statistics of formal university procedures. Students and postdocs regularly inquire about these statistics when considering formal processes, seeking information on the types of cases, resolutions reached, and timeframes involved. Therefore, this data should be readily accessible and presented in a clear and understandable format, with caveats explaining potential limitations of the data and acknowledging that statistics may influence individual decisions to pursue formal processes.

- **To further support a healthy and collaborative campus climate, the University should invest in additional resources and staffing for the Ombuds Office, enabling us to proactively expand outreach and educational programming to the campus community.**

- The continuing trend of increasing visitors and the 4% increase in mediation services utilization indicates a growing demand for conflict resolution support within the University. While the Ombuds Office remains committed to serving all members of the campus community, this rise in requests suggests a need for increased capacity to effectively address the complex issues individuals are facing. By investing in additional resources and staffing, the Ombuds Office can expand its outreach efforts, proactively engage with different campus groups, and develop educational programming that promotes conflict prevention and resolution strategies.
- This proactive approach will not only help to manage and resolve conflicts before they escalate but also foster a greater understanding of communication skills, conflict styles, and available resources. Ultimately, empowering individuals with the tools and knowledge to navigate challenging situations constructively contributes to a more positive and productive learning and working environment for all.