



UNIVERSITY OF
GEORGIA

Equal Opportunity Office

August 26, 2022

TO: Jere W. Morehead, President
213 Administration Building

FROM: Qiana N. Wilson, Director
Equal Opportunity Office
278 Brooks Hall

RE: **2021-2022 Ombuds Annual Report**

The Ombuds Annual Report has been submitted annually to the Office of the President, since the Ombuds Program (“Program”) began in 2008. The initial purpose of the Program was to address concerns about the handling of sexual harassment complaints. The Program has appropriately and responsibly responded to this awareness and currently serves as a confidential resource for persons requiring information and support for alleged instances of sexual misconduct. Despite this continued focus, the Program has grown to aid in a variety of areas resulting in sexual harassment issues consistently being a small percentage of the ombuds’ contacts.¹ With that understanding, this Report is charged with discussing trends or patterns in the reporting of issues and concerns by students, faculty, and staff, and making recommendations for changes or improvements to existing policies and procedures.

During the 2021-22 academic year, the ombuds² were: Charisse Harper from the Office of the Dean of Students who served as the student ombudsperson; Dr. Jenny Gaver a Professor in the J.M. Tull School of Accounting who served as the faculty ombudsperson; and Steve Gibson from the College of Agricultural and Environmental Sciences – the longest serving ombuds until his departure from UGA in May 2022 – who served as the staff ombudsperson. Gaver and Gibson left their roles this past spring, leaving Harper as the only remaining ombudsperson. Fortunately, the Program was able to replace the departing ombudspersons with two exceptional members of the UGA community who have agreed to serve.

After undergoing training, Dr. Joseph Bartges, Professor of Medicine and Nutrition in the Department of Small Animal Medicine and Surgery in the College of Veterinary Medicine, will

¹ There were three (3) reports of sexual harassment to the Ombuds in the 2021-2022 reporting period which is up from last year’s report of one (1).

² “Ombuds” or “Ombudspersons” are terms used interchangeably throughout this Report.

serve as the faculty ombudsperson, and Ms. Anjali Dougherty, Associate Director for the Office of Finance and Administration in the Carl Vinson Institute of Government, will serve as the staff ombudsperson.

In addition to the changes in roles, this has been a year of reenvisioning how the Program might benefit an ever-evolving university. Throughout the past year, the ombudspersons have met with campus partners to obtain a broader perspective of resources available to the campus community and consider ways the Program might engage with campus partners to provide the greatest value to the UGA community.

2021 – 2022 TRENDS AND PATTERNS

The ombudspersons addressed **143** concerns during the 2021-2022 reporting period.³ The number of contacts from students was higher than the contacts from faculty and staff for the second year in a row.⁴ During the 2019-2020 reporting period, the contacts for all three (3) areas were similar.⁵ For the 2021-2022 reporting period, student contacts accounted for more than **57%** of the total ombuds contacts – up **20%** from the previous reporting period. Much of this increase might be explained by the rise in usage of the Program by graduate students. Graduate student visits made up more than half of the student contacts in 2021-2022. The uptick in graduate student visits occurred after the Program met with graduate coordinators and students to provide awareness of the Program.

TOPICS FOR CONSIDERATION

Employment/workplace issues, particularly interpersonal conflict and supervision concerns continue to be the most prevalent matters addressed by the faculty and staff ombudspersons. During the 2020-2021 reporting period, it was noted that “higher than average student concerns surrounding housing, health, and accommodations are expected considering the necessary adjustment to operations over the last 18 months.” The 2021-2022 reporting period noted contacts related to these areas drop to one (1) contact.⁶ With that, there were sharp increases in student contacts involving discrimination, personality conflicts, and graduate assistantships.⁷ The 2021 Report, stated that the “increase [in student contacts] was mostly attributed to the almost **30%** rise in student contacts with the student ombudsperson, who noted the increase in graduate student concerns and reports”, this remains true for this reporting year.

³ There were **134** concerns logged during the 2020-2021 reporting period.

⁴ Student contacts went from **33%** of the total contacts the previous year to **39%** in the 2020-2021 reporting period.

⁵ Faculty contacts were **35**, staff contacts were **39**, and student contacts were **37**.

⁶ The 2020-2021 reporting period saw housing issues account for more than **20%** of the total contacts.

⁷ These areas accounted for more than **one-third (1/3)** of the total student contacts during the 2021-2022 reporting period.

NOTABLES

Overall, there is a consistent observation that some contacts are more complex and time-consuming than others, and contacts are drastically increasing for specific segments of the UGA population. The ombudspersons have requested additional training and information related to available resources. In response, EOO has created an Ombuds Handbook to be utilized by the ombudspersons in the discharge of their ombuds' duties and will provide increased training and other resources to the ombudspersons.

While the Program operates independently, to ensure the university community understands as was stated in the Ombuds Program Charter that the "Ombuds will operate under the supervision of the Coordinator. The Program is intended to be as independent in its structure, function, and appearance as possible. This means that in the legitimate performance of their duties, the ombuds shall be free from interference, retaliation, influence, or control of others outside the Program," the Program's website and URL⁸ have been updated to remove any doubt of autonomy and confidentiality.

This year, the Program also focused on the awareness of available university resources and communication with campus partners; the ombudspersons were scheduled to meet with key campus partners, to include the Graduate School (September), HR Workforce Engagement (October), Office of Faculty Affairs (December), and Employee Well-being (February). We also worked to develop an Ombuds Onboarding Process in conjunction with the above-referenced Ombuds Handbook.

In addition to the collaborative meetings, the ombuds also attended a lunch & learn hosted by the Graduate School, student experience meetings, a fall semester procedures meeting, and a panel for the Plant Biology graduate students. More meetings/presentations are scheduled for this upcoming semester.⁹ This activity supports other university-wide initiatives aimed at supporting graduate student success through awareness and access to important resources.

SUMMARY

The Program continues to serve as a resource for the entire UGA community. It provides an opportunity for community members to speak candidly about concerns and discuss those concerns in a safe environment. The Program also provides an opportunity for the ombuds to engage in professional development through developing relationships with ombudspersons at other USG and peer institutions. This upcoming year will see the Program continue to focus on areas of concern, meet with key stakeholders, and provide intentional communication with the campus community to ensure knowledge and understanding of the Program.

⁸ See Ombudsperson Program Website: <https://ombuds.uga.edu/>

⁹ The first graduate student meeting for this reporting period is scheduled for August 31, 2022.

Ombuds Program Report

August 26, 2022

Page 4

The Ombuds Program is a valued part of the UGA community, and your continued support is appreciated.

Encls: 2021-2022 Ombudspersons Data Report

cc: Dr. Jack Hu, Provost

Dr. Luke Naehrer, University Council