

**UConn Ombuds Office Report  
June 1, 2017 – June 30, 2019**

Included in this report are data and commentary from the fifth and sixth years' operation of the UConn Ombuds Office. Issues or concerns raised by visitors are tabulated according to the International Ombudsman Association (IOA) uniform reporting categories (a copy of the IOA categories is located at [ombuds.uconn.edu](http://ombuds.uconn.edu)). In some places, data are further subdivided according to graduate student, non-faculty, or faculty employee status. Cumulative data and 3-year averages are also presented through the fifth year (ending June 30, 2018). During the sixth year (July 1, 2018 – June 30, 2019), Ombuds services were formally extended to the UConn Health community at the Farmington campus. Data collection for the sixth year therefore includes UConn Health visitors (127 of the 361 total visits for that year). Due to recording errors during the year, all visitor data is reported collectively. Thus, issue data and employee category information such as specific union membership cannot be separated according to campus location. For this reason, the sixth-year data is not included in the 3-year averages but is reported separately. Future reports will identify issues and visitor data according to UConn Health location or Storrs/Regional location.

When reviewing the data, it is important to interpret the information in the context of how an ombuds comes in contact with visitors and how issues are tabulated. Visitors voluntarily contact the office; no one is compelled to interact with the UConn Ombuds. The ombuds serves as a neutral party and does not attempt to investigate the veracity of any statements by visitors or determine the facts of what is being described. The issues raised are derived from what visitors report and then translated into the IOA categories. Thus, there are no verbatim quotes from visitors nor is there information that might reveal the source of a reported issue.

### Visitors

The visitor data presented can only be interpreted as *the number (or percentage) of employees, trainees, or graduate students experiencing a campus concern who have chosen to contact the Ombuds Office as a neutral and confidential means to explore options towards resolving an issue*. The data presented **do not** represent the percentage of all employees or graduate students experiencing conflict nor the extent to which employees, trainees, and graduate students seek other informal methods of resolving conflict.

Typical employee usage rates of ombuds offices at colleges and universities range from 1% to 5% of the constituency population. During the 2017-2018 (5<sup>th</sup>) year, the employee usage rate of the UConn Ombuds Office was over 4%. The graduate student

usage rate approaches 1%. In year 5, total visitor numbers were similar to the 3-year average. In year 6, there was a 24% increase in visitors compared to the 3-year average. However, this aberration reflects the splitting of duties between the Storrs/Regional campuses (234 visitors) and the UConn Health campus (127 visitors). Over the past three years, the number of professional and nonprofessional staff visitors has been relatively stable though graduate student visitor numbers have decreased. Faculty visits and management visitors has progressively increased.

Faculty contacts to the ombuds office have doubled over the past 3 years and surpassed 100 in the sixth year. Due to the increase in faculty visits, there is a decreased percentage of staff and graduate student visits though raw numbers are comparable to previous years. A portion of the increase in faculty traffic is likely word of mouth referral and referral from union leadership at the Storrs campus. In addition, the UConn Health roll out encompassed meetings with primarily faculty and hospital staff. Rather than representing a specific change in faculty stress during the last 1-2 years, the kinetics of faculty visit growth may have simply lagged behind that of nonfaculty employees. Noteworthy changes in graduate student traffic (both slightly decreased visits and in the content of graduate issues raised) reflect the superlative work of the new Graduate Student and Postdoctoral Affairs team at the Graduate School in addressing graduate student concerns.

#### Issues or concerns raised by visitors to the Ombuds Office

Issues raised range across several categories for any given visitor. Often, a visitor will have in mind one or a few main concern(s) but several other issues will be revealed during the course of an interaction. The Ombuds makes no attempt to assess what a visitor's *major concern* or *most important concern* may be when recording issues. Despite this limitation, the data may be helpful in discerning the types and frequencies of issues on the minds of people choosing to explore informal approaches to problems affecting their work. As is the case with usage rate, the types of issues raised are very much in line with reports from ombuds offices at other universities.

The largest IOA categories of concern raised by visitors continues to be those of *Evaluative Relationships*, issues arising amidst supervisor-supervisee relationships (>60% of visitors), Career Progression (>30% of visitors) and peer relationships (>20% of visitors). Of the increasing faculty visits during the period of this report, and many of the graduate student and staff visits, these issues were intertwined with concerns about organizational climate, diversity, and inclusiveness. The commentary section of this two-year report focuses on these types of interactions.

---

Mirroring the response of institutions in academia, private industry, and government, the University of Connecticut established the Ombuds Office in 2013 to assist employees and graduate students pursuing informal resolution of campus concerns or problems. The Ombuds Office is located on the 2<sup>nd</sup> level of the Homer Babbidge Library and maintains a campus webpage at [ombuds.uconn.edu](http://ombuds.uconn.edu). The UConn Ombuds is intended to serve as an

*organizational ombudsperson*. There are a variety of ombuds models all emphasizing that the incumbent has no command authority in the organization, functions independently of normal reporting channels, does not serve in other roles that could jeopardize neutrality, and is committed to confidentiality of communications to the extent allowed by law.<sup>a</sup> The distinction of an *organizational ombudsperson* is the absence of the intention and ability to conduct formal investigations, be a finder of facts, publish findings, and render judgments on grievances whereas *statutory* or *classical ombuds* are vested with some or all of these powers. The UConn Ombuds Office Charter describing the office and the Standards of Practice and Code of Ethics of the IOA are located at [ombuds.uconn.edu](http://ombuds.uconn.edu).

Respectfully submitted,

Jim Wohl, DVM, MPA  
UConn Ombuds

---

**Estimated Ombuds Office Service Population:** The Ombuds Office service population includes faculty and non-faculty employees and graduate students at the Storrs and regional campuses but did not include the UConn Health Center until November 2018. These estimated numbers and percentages of employee and graduate student populations are unofficial numbers tabulated solely for the purpose of interpreting the visitor data for this report.

**Table 1.** Total Estimated Employees: ~ 4918 (Storrs and regional campuses, 2017)

Classification	Number	% total
Faculty *	~1857	~38%
Non-faculty / Non-GA	~3061	~62%

\* tenure track and non tenure track

**Table 1a.** Total Estimated Employees by Union Membership (Storrs and regional campuses, 2017)

Classification	Number	% total employees
AAUP	~1813	~36.0%
UCPEA	~1889	~38.2%
NP-2 (CEUI)	~460	~9.8%
NP-3 (AFSCME)	~144	~4.6%
NP-5 (CPFU)	~136	~2.3%
<b>Total</b>	<b>~ 4345</b>	<b>(91%)</b>

**Table 1c.** Total Graduate/Professional Students and Post Docs in Ombuds Office Service Population (Storrs and regional campuses, 2017)

<b>Total Graduate &amp; Professional Students</b>	<b>~ 6434</b>
<b>Total Post Docs</b>	<b>~137</b>

**UConn Ombuds Office Visitor Data:** Each visit represents a single voluntary contact to the office by an individual. Each visit could represent a single interaction with the individual initiating the contact or a more involved series of meetings including meetings with other individuals or groups.

**Table 2.** Ombuds Office Visitor Demographics & Employee Classification 2016-2019  
{Total visitors = 294 (year 5), 361 (year 6)}

<b>Classification</b>	<b>Year 3</b>	<b>Year 4</b>	<b>Year 5</b>	<b>3yr Average</b>	<b>Year 6</b>
<b>Total</b>	<b>271</b>	<b>310</b>	<b>294</b>	<b>292</b>	<b>361</b>
Faculty	52 (19%)	49 (16%)	81 (28%)	61 (21%)	106 (29%)
Staff	148 (55%)	126 (41%)	96 (33%)	123 (42%)	144 (40%)
AAUP	52	49	81	61	-
UCPEA	77	67	84	76	-
NP-2	9	5	7	7	-
AFSCME	7	3	3	4	-
NP-5	3	2	2	2	-
Administration	35 (13%)	65 (21%)	45 (15%)	48 (16%)	49 (14%)
Grad	58 (21%)	89 (29%)	63 (21%)	70 (24%)	56 (15%)
Other	13 (5%)	10 (3%)	9 (3%)	11 (4%)	6 (2%)

**Table 3.** Ombuds Actions in Response to visitors 2016-2109 (multiple actions may be taken with any given visitor).

Action	Year 3	Year 4	Year 5	3 yr Average	Year 6
Individual consultation / problem solving	196 (72%)	220 (71%)	205 (70%)	71%	267 (74%)
Referral to policy or campus agency/office	38 (14%)	65 (21%)	64 (22%)	19%	72 (20%)
Facilitation with third parties	62 (23%)	77 (25%)	65 (22%)	23%	73 (20%)
Notify campus office on behalf of visitor	2 (<1%)	4 (1%)	2 (1%)	<1%	5 (1%)
Inquiry to campus office on behalf of visitor	32 (12%)	38 (12%)	35 (12%)	12%	54 (15%)
Look into situation	14 (5%)	13 (4%)	8 (3%)	4%	(10) 3%
Provide upward feedback to administrators / leaders	9 (3%)	15 (5%)	12 (4%)	4%	11 (3%)

**Individual consultation / problem solving:** Listening, providing and receiving information, reframing issues, discussing options for addressing a visitor's concern rather than choosing for a visitor how to respond. Many visitors to an ombuds office are seeking an impartial listener to assist them in verbally expressing a concern. No further action may be desired or needed.

**Referral to policy or campus agency/office:** Ombuds are in a position to respond to confidential inquiries for referral to appropriate offices or services that are available on campus. The ombuds must be well versed in university complaint and notification procedures and have a working knowledge of the appropriate offices responsible for regulatory and compliance functions of the university. This information resource function compliments the ombuds practice of remaining up to date and knowledgeable of current university policies.

**Facilitation with third parties:** A visitor may seek the ombuds assistance in finding an intermediary in speaking with another party privately in resolving a conflict – sometimes shuttling between disputants and other times through a facilitated discussion similar to mediation. The intermediary may be the ombuds or another appropriate person. The ombuds may serve as a facilitator with groups when requested and appropriate or refer

multiparty conflicts to facilitation services elsewhere on or off campus. The ombuds only serves in this role with the permission of the involved parties.

**Notify campus office on behalf of visitor:** Under certain circumstances, the ombuds may notify a campus office of information on behalf of a visitor in order to surface allegations while protecting the observer's identity or safety.

**Inquiry to campus office on behalf of visitor:** A visitor may wish to confidentially seek clarification regarding the meaning of a specific university policy or procedure.

**Look into situation:** The ombuds does not perform formal fact finding investigations. On rare occasions, the informal practice of looking into or following up on an issue at the request of a visitor wishing to remain anonymous may be undertaken with the understanding that the information may be used in advancing an informal resolution. When looking into a situation uncovers that a more formal investigation is warranted, the ombuds will inform the visitor of the appropriate office of responsibility.

**Provide upward feedback to administrators / leaders:** Throughout the year, the ombuds may report observations or serial related concerns that are tied to systemic conditions, ambiguities, or absence of policy. Such feedback is made while preserving visitor confidentiality.

**Table 4.** Issues Raised by Visitors – IOA Categories  
(% of visitors expressing concern)

Issue Category	Year 3	Year 4	Year 5	3 yr avg	Year 6
Compensation & Benefits	4%	4%	5%	4%	2%
Evaluative Relationships	57%	66%	68%	64%	70%
Peer & Colleague Relationships	22%	20%	20%	21%	24%
Career Profession and Development	34%	37%	40%	33%	39%
Legal, Regulatory, Financial, and Compliance	23%	17%	21%	19%	20%
Safety, Health, and Physical Environment	5%	4%	5%	4%	4%
Services/Administration Issues	24%	28%	26%	25%	27%
Organizational, Strategic, and Mission Related	24%	27%	25%	25%	31%
Values, Ethics, and Standards	7%	9%	10%	9%	10%

### *Commentary*

The faculty, staff, and graduate students on college campuses and for whom university ombuds serve and assist, may be as sincere and altruistic a people as can be found assembled together in today's society. For seven years, the UConn Ombuds Office has been a space for members of this community to solve problems, discuss what drives them, examine their personal goals and how those goals define, and at times compete with, the mission of the university. During the two years represented by this report, many visitors discussed their disillusionment with attitudes, practices, and behaviors in their work environments. Of top of mind in this commentary are the women, people of color, international faculty and students, and other underrepresented members of our community. Many of them expressed thoughts of leaving UConn and some have indeed left. A recurring theme in these discussions, sometimes named, other times implied, is loneliness.

The communitarian scholar Amitai Etzioni describes strong community as an antidote to loneliness. In thinking about community, these visitors provide a context of what diversity and inclusion has or has not come to mean in our community. When encountering academic cultural norms where race, gender, and ethnicity are the context, people shared how choosing silence leads to isolation and how giving voice often leads to agonizing interactions. The failure to engage with one another in a way befitting a community – as Christopher Lebron writes, *with care, charity, and grace* – is an encumbrance to our entire community, leaving the values of diversity and inclusion, at best, putative. Diversity and inclusion are tests of the strength, or weakness, of our community.

\*\*\*

At the Listening Sessions held by the VP/CDO Search Committee the question was posed “What can we do to support diversity and inclusion and the new Vice President and CDO?” It seems a part of the answer is to seek and share experiences about how traditional norms – that is, behaviors and practices that seem traditional at UConn and in higher education – obstruct the inclusion of people among us who were not participants in the development of those long-standing norms. In this engagement lie the reasons why inclusivity eludes us. We can acknowledge the discomfort of reappraising our norms, including the way in which we communicate about scholarship, teach in classrooms, and socialize as community members. That discomfort will be necessary in ideas that are genuinely transformative. To be sure, in predominately white institutions, that discomfort will be felt by those who are presently comfortable. This question posed by the search committee calls upon the comfortable class of faculty, administrators, staff, and students to be alert to ideas that bring discomfort, to be suspicious of rhetoric absent of discomfort, and to advocate for those among us, including our new VP/CDO, who have the expertise, experiences, and commitment to generate action.

In 2005, The Association of American Colleges & Universities (AAC&U) unveiled the initiative *Making Excellence Inclusive* to help campuses align diversity, inclusion, and educational quality. The term *Inclusive Excellence* captured the initiative's implications – that excellence in scholarship, teaching, and service can't be achieved without faculty, student, administrator, and staff diversity. In the intervening time, the UConn student population has diversified though the percentage of faculty of color has lagged markedly behind student diversity. *The Daily Campus* recently highlighted demographic disparities between underrepresented students and faculty at UConn that mirror those across U.S. colleges and universities. White faculty at UConn, on the other hand, are overrepresented compared to both student and Connecticut state populations. Nationally, students of color identify diversifying the faculty as the greatest need in higher education and similar sentiments have been expressed by our own UConn students. If diversity and inclusion at UConn is grounded in the spirit of the AAC&U initiative, these statistics tell us we cannot achieve institutional excellence – that presently, we are not excellent.

Though intentional recruitment and hiring efforts over the past two decades have led to modest and transient increases in faculty and staff diversity, poor retention has stalled durable progress. In this sense, successes in the early *diversifying* phase of *Inclusive Excellence* have become failures in the second *inclusion* phase. For many visitors, a marker for belonging is the allocation of the resources, opportunities and privileges that are necessary for a fulfilling life at UConn. Norms governing scholarly, classroom, and social environments mediate interpersonal and departmental discourse, interpretations of scholarly and instructional merit, and service assignments, that form the milieu in which people seek professional growth and affirmation. In addition to running counter-current to individual professional success, dissonant norms can offend and preclude participation in discussions over ideas, planning, and decision making – the systemic organizing activities of academia. As in all communities, academia's norms are the street-level inclusive practices that function independently of, and often in spite of, the aspirational claims and rhetoric of diversity.

The connection between loneliness and feeling repelled by norms haunts our community. Attempting to connect with those more comfortable, more accustomed to predominately white institutions, feels frustrating and dangerous. Comfortable – that is, traditional – individuals and groups bristle and retract from challenges to local and campus-wide norms, mistaking our norms as values. But community norms are not values, nor are they merely a collection of individual choices or preferences. Rather, norms are behavioral guidelines of action that help us execute our values, though the longer standing the norms it seems, the easier it is to confuse this distinction.

Academic institutions are like other communities and are based on shared values, norms, and reinforcing relationships supporting a common meaning or mission. Community norms arise from the people who comprise a community. Over hundreds of years, predominately white institutions have evolved cultural norms from an inadequately diverse population of people by today's standards. Through this lens, it's understandable why, after spending a period of time at an academic institution, underrepresented people



and diversity workers are frustrated with many of those norms, with the allocation of resources, opportunities, and privileges.

Putting our norms on the table is the hard work of achieving *Inclusive Excellence*. If institutional norms evolve from the people present in an institution, it's axiomatic that changing the people present will change norms. This notion poses no threat to long held institutional values because norms are not values. (Indeed, diversity and inclusion are now decades-long stated values – values that when inculcated will result in excellence). Nor are norms virtues. Alasdair Macintyre described virtues as those habits, predispositions and individual traits of industry within people that are necessary to produce the “goods” inherent to a practice (in our case the practice of higher education, among which the goods include discovery, transferring knowledge, and civic responsibility). Goods inherent to higher education benefit everyone and are tethered to our values (for example, *the advancement of knowledge leads to the betterment of society*). Reappraising norms naturally deepens and fortifies our academic virtues as it does our values.

Our community of higher education is a domain of ideas and knowledge. Some say also the pursuit of truth. But the truth can't always be ascertained in a convincing way and we're left to rely on evidence and its power to persuade one another. Our norms of scholarship: peer review, debate, critique, experimentation rooted in scientific method, and academic freedom are traits that maintain those channels of persuasion. In such a community, sole reliance on policies and laws to coerce norms of behavior are not only likely to fall short but also cut across the most powerful currency in our academic culture – the ability to persuade one another. Fifteen years after the AAC&U initiative on *Inclusive Excellence*, we are being called to engage, to listen to one another with care, charity, and grace, to seek and advocate for the discomfort in proposed solutions, and make use of our defining community traits so lacking elsewhere in today's society: our thirst for new ideas and our willingness to be persuaded by them.

## References

Ahmed, S (2012). *On being included: Racism and diversity in institutional life*. Durham, Duke University Press.

Anthym, M. & Tuitt, F. (2019). When the levees break: The cost of vicarious trauma, microaggressions and emotional labor for Black administrators and faculty engaging in race work at traditionally White institutions. *Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, 32(9), 1072-1093.

Etzioni, A. (2009). The common good and rights: A neo-communitarian approach. *Georgetown Journal of International Affairs*, (Winter/Spring), 113-119.

Lebron, C.J. (2017). *The Making of Black Lives Matter: A brief history of an idea*. New York, Oxford University Press.

Noto, J. Students of color at UConn say they feel underrepresented, faculty face challenges. *The Daily Campus*, January 30, 2020. Retrieved from <https://dailycampus.com/stories/2020/1/30/students-of-color-at-uconn-say-they-feel-underrepresented-faculty-face-challenges>

Macintyre, A. (2003). *After virtue*. Notre Dame, IN, Notre Dame University Press.

Perrow, C. (1984). *Complex organizations: A critical essay*. New York, McGraw-Hill, Inc.

Stanley, C.A., Watson, K.L., Reyes, J.M., & Varela, K.S. (2019). Organizational change and the chief diversity officer: A case study of institutionalizing a diversity plan. *Journal of Diversity in Higher Education*, 12(3), 255-265.

Williams, D.A., Berger, J.B. & McClendon, S.A. (2005). Toward a model of inclusive excellence and change in postsecondary institutions. Association of American Colleges and Universities Retrieved from <http://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/viewdoc/download?doi=10.1.1.129.2597&rep=rep1&type=pdf>