

# Ombuds Office for Students & Postdoctoral Appointees

## 2014-15 Annual Report



In 2014-15, Student Ombuds staff handled 165 cases during the academic year, an increase of 10% from the previous year. In addition to students, we are available to postdoctoral appointees, faculty, and staff who have student-related concerns, and other community members such as recent graduates, alumni, prospective students, and parents.

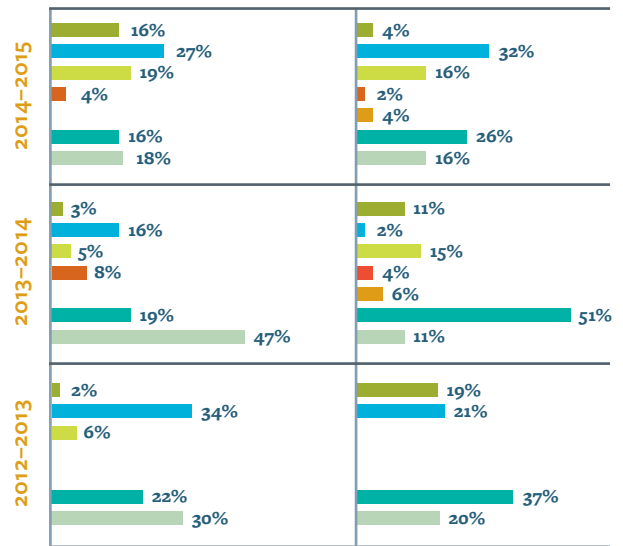
59% of undergraduate and 50% graduate student cases required follow-up. Follow-up involves additional meetings with the visitor, outreach to third parties, research on policies, communication, and possible mediation.

### Demographics

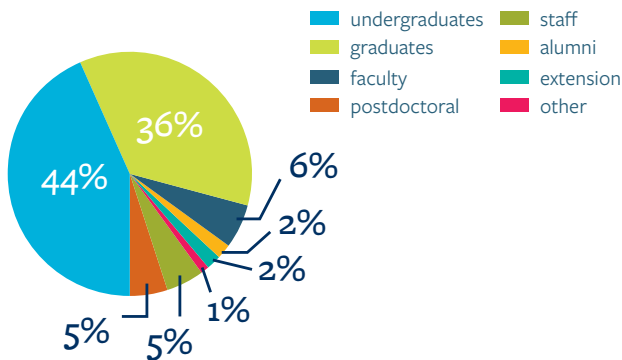
- Black/African American
- Asian/Asian American
- Chicano/a & Latino/a
- Middle Eastern
- Native American
- White
- Not Given

#### Undergraduate

#### Graduate



### All Visitors by Role



### Other Demographics 2014-2015

	Undergraduate	Graduate
first-generation	27%	26%
non-California resident	14%	19%
disability	16%	19%
international	6%	9%

# UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA

## Mission

The mission of the Ombuds Office for Students and Postdoctoral Appointees is to provide an informal dispute resolution process. The Ombudsperson does not advocate for individuals, but advocates for overall fairness, justice, respect for differences, and reasonable solutions to student and postdoctoral issues and concerns. As such, the Ombuds Office tracks trends, behaviors, and practices that serve as alert mechanisms for systemic and sustainable change at UC Berkeley.

The Ombuds Office for Students and Postdoctoral Appointees was established to support and reinforce fair policies and procedures. The institution recognizes the value of providing an informal dispute resolution resource for the Berkeley community. Those who use this office are empowered to decide for themselves how they will address their concerns and are coached in conflict resolution techniques and the language of non-defensive communication. Students are given invaluable resources and information to support them in their process of exploring optimal ways of moving through challenging situations to a viable solution. The Ombuds Office works toward mutual resolutions that reflect the highest vision for students, staff, and

faculty alike. Our participation is solely geared toward providing fair and impartial outcomes that reflect student success, minimal use of administrative resources, reducing campus liability and exposure, and ultimately, creating and maintaining an environment that furthers campus goals of equity, civility, and inclusion.

We are intentional in meeting the developmental needs of our student visitors. Our staff have backgrounds and credentials in student development theory which we apply in our work. Our understanding of psychosocial, cognitive, and racial identity student development theories informs our approach with visitors to assist the facilitation of resolutions.



# Campus & Professional Involvement

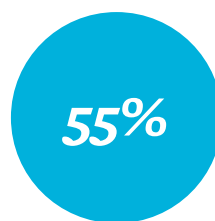
To enhance our outreach and visibility within the campus community, we served on a number of campuswide and divisionwide committees. These include the Asian Pacific American Systemwide Alliance, Stay Day Conference Committee, Student Affairs Strategic Planning Initiative, the Graduate Division Social Committee, Equity & Inclusion's Rising Together conference, the Council of Ethnic Staff Organizations, Council of Staff Organizations, and the Restorative Justice advisory group.

In order to stay abreast of student issues and trends, we attended divisionwide and campuswide meetings including Student Affairs Cabinet, Student Affairs Roundtable, Graduate Division Staff, Graduate Student Services, Graduate Student Advisers, Case Management Team, and Advising Network Council.

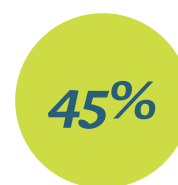
We are also members of the International Ombudsman Association and served on the planning committee for the annual conference. The director has served as co-chair of the conference for the past two years. We also have membership in the National Association of Student Personnel Administrators and served on the regional conference planning committee.

## Student Visitors

Undergraduate

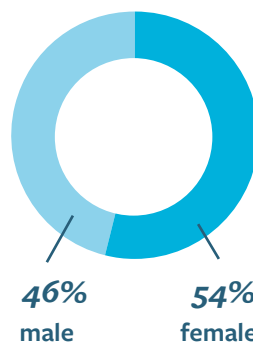


Graduate

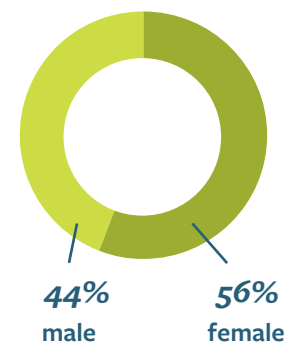


## Student Visitors by Gender

Undergraduate



Graduate



# Referrals

The two main ways that students find their way to our office is via a campus referral or by searching online. We work with numerous campus departments to facilitate mutual resolutions to our visitors' conflicts and concerns. We also refer students to many other resources on campus. These departments and colleges include but are not limited to: Graduate Division, College of Letters and Science, Disabled Students' Program, Tang Center, Students of Concern, Office of Student Conduct, Berkeley International Office (BIO), Financial Aid and Scholarships Office, Registrars,

Admissions and Enrollment, Student Legal Services, Student Advocate's Office, the Transfer, Re-entry, and Student Parent Center (TRSP), and various academic departments on campus.

Approximately 39% of our students find us by way of referral from staff or faculty members from departments across campus. The next common way students learn about our resource is by searching online or by receiving a referral from a friend.



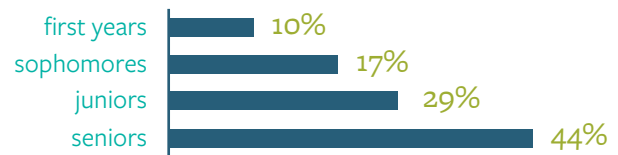
# Outreach & Trainings

The Student Ombuds Office also proactively maintains good relationships with campus administration, faculty, and staff to ensure broad campus understanding of the purpose and role of our office. This past year, we provided outreach and trainings on conflict resolution, mediation, intercultural conflict styles, giving the gift of feedback, and communication. We tailored trainings and workshops for Residential and Student Service Program (RSSP) student staff, Optometry New Student Orientation, Student Advocates, ASUC Leadership Symposium, Student Affairs Learning and Development, and student clubs.

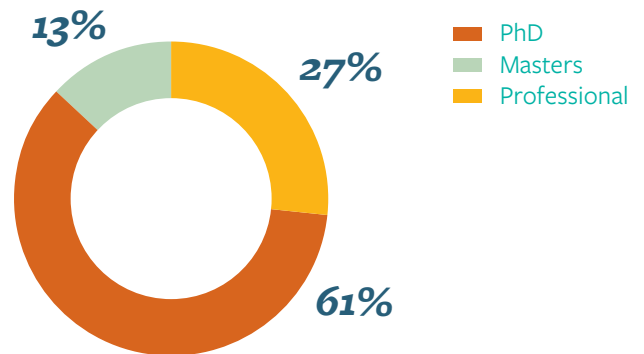
## Consultations & Non-Student Visitors

11% of our total caseload included providing consultations to faculty and staff on student-related matters. Consultations generally include discussing difficult situations and exploring various options toward a resolution. We provide support by helping to clarify policies and procedures, talking through ambiguous situations, and providing coaching on how to approach complicated cases.

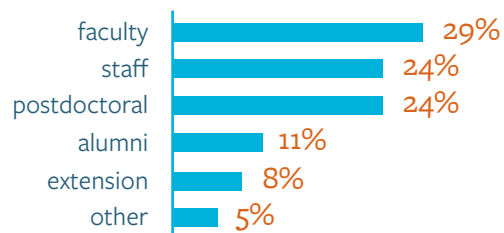
## Undergraduate Visitors by Year



## Graduate Visitors by Degree Program



## Non-Student Visitors



# Trends & Issues

## Grades & Academic Progress

For nearly half of undergraduate visitors, grades were an issue of concern and a reason for their appointment. There has been a steady increase in the previous three years in the percentage of students expressing concern over their grades. Cases involving grades often involved other areas of concern, including issues of communication with the instructor or department, perceptions of mistreatment, and lack of understanding or clarity about policy and procedure.

Many cases involved students being unclear about grading rubrics or criteria in the class, attendance policies, or feelings of unfair treatment. They came to us for assistance on reaching out to professors and graduate student instructors, or departments, to receive coaching on how to best communicate with their faculty, and to discuss options.

We also provided guidance on grade disputes so students better understood the policy and necessary criteria, timeline, and process before they pursued this avenue. While most students addressed their grade disputes informally, a small percentage pursued formal procedures.

In many cases, conflict could have been avoided by a thorough discussion in the course syllabi or academic program handbook of the factors

that would be used to evaluate progress and determine grades, and any non-academic factors like absences and class participation that could be part of that determination. In the absence of clear guidelines and grading rubrics, students may perceive that personal factors are taken into account when academic performance is evaluated.

For graduate students, while academic progress was the second highest reported concern in the prior year, it dropped to the fifth most reported issue in 2014–15.

### Undergraduate Issues

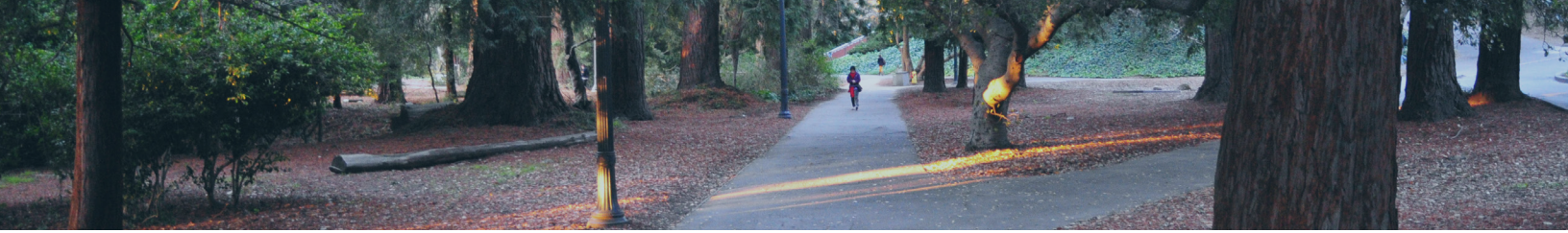
Grades	46%	Financial Concerns	13%
Treatment/Civility	34%	Academic Dishonesty	13%
Communication	27%	Disability	11%
Policy/Procedure Not Clear	27%	Cases with facilitated resolution	27%
Policy/Procedure Not Followed	16%	Cases that required follow-up	59%

### Graduate Issues

Communication	44%	Policy/Procedure Not Followed	16%
Policy/Procedure Not Clear	33%	SHIP	14%
Treatment/Civility	28%	Grades	11%
Financial Concerns	25%	Dismissal	11%
Academic Progress	13%	Cases with facilitated resolution	32%
		Cases that required follow-up	50%

### Faculty, Staff, and Other Groups' Issues

Policy/Procedure Not Clear	26%	Grades	16%
Treatment/Civility	21%	Policy/Procedure Not Followed	13%
Communication	21%		



Graduate student cases are often more complex because they can involve relationship issues with advisers, chairs, and committees. These relationships often have inherent power differentials that further impact all aspects of the relationship and complicate the conflict. The Ombuds Office provided coaching to graduate students on how to handle conflict with their faculty, adviser, chair, or committee members on a number of factors that were affecting academic progress. Such concerns included disagreement in academic focus of research, intellectual property issues, communication, treatment and civility. Related issues to their academic progress included financial concerns and lack of understanding of related policies and procedures.

### **Treatment & Civility**

Treatment and civility rose to the second most highly reported issue for undergraduates and third highest for graduate students. This was a jump from being the fourth highest concern the previous year. More than double the percentage of undergraduates reported this issue as an area of concern, while the percentage for graduate students stayed the same.

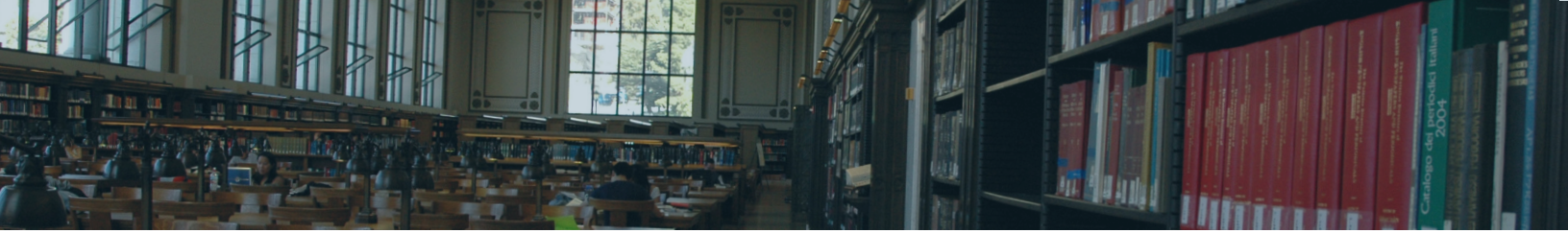
Cases involving this issue ranged from perception of disrespect or rude behavior, lack of responsiveness to emails or meeting requests, a negative or even hostile environment in one's department or lab, and perceived lack of support both academically and personally. Some cases involved students feeling intimidated, and even threatened, academically and interpersonally. They sought coaching, perspective, and guidance on their options for handling these situations.

### **Communication**

Communication remains a top issue of concern for both undergraduates and graduate students, although it decreased in percentage for both groups this year. Despite the drop in percentage, it is still the highest presenting concern for graduate students and the third most stated area of concern for undergraduate students. Communication is the third highest presenting issue for faculty, staff, and other groups.

Many of the cases with communication concerns involved some level of miscommunication, lack of communication, and/or misinterpretation. The Ombuds Office engaged in facilitating resolution through the exploration of multiple perspectives, obtaining and interpreting various sides of a story, clarifying communication, and coaching on communication skills, including the receiving and giving of feedback and the use of non-defensive language.

How something is said continues to be more important than what is being said. We recommend the use of clear and explicit language in both written and verbal communication. We also discourage the use of email when addressing issues that are more complicated in nature or involving some level of conflict. In-person communication with follow-up in written form is a more effective way of mitigating potential misunderstandings. It is also important that communication be as timely as possible, while also setting expectations with students or colleagues regarding realistic response times.



## Unclear Policies & Procedures

Unclear policies and procedures dropped to fourth place for undergraduates from third in the previous year. It rose to second place from third for graduate students.

The Ombudsperson supported students in finding relevant policies and procedures to student cases when the policies were not obvious, as well as explaining and interpreting these policies to students. In some cases, students misinterpreted policies or were not aware that policies existed related to their cases. In other situations, students experienced conflict because they were given differing information by faculty, staff, or departments, or they did not know where they could refer to for the appropriate policies that affected their situation.

UC Berkeley is a large and complex university that is constantly undergoing growth and change as it strives to meet the needs of the student body. As staff transitions occur and organizational changes take place, it is important that updated procedures and policies are communicated to students. We recommend that policies and procedures on websites and handbooks are made explicit, concise, user-friendly, and are updated regularly.

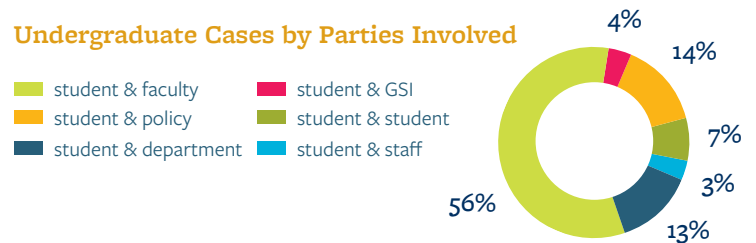
We recommend that faculty and staff are provided the necessary information so that they know to whom students should be referred if they have questions or find themselves in a unique situation. Students are sometimes unintentionally provided misinformation that can negatively impact their academic progress.

This can lead to a domino effect of other barriers, including financial-related concerns, registration and enrollment issues, and access to university services.

## Additional Issues

In addition to the topics discussed previously, we also had cases involving the following issues: academic dishonesty, academic integrity, academic problems, assault/harassment, bullying, changing degrees, changing programs, compensation/benefits, department/organizational climate, disability, dismissal, diversity, enrollment, exception to policy, faculty behavior/misconduct, financial aid, housing, illness, intellectual property, mediation, medical issues, mental health, quality of service, rape, assault, readmission, registration, responsiveness, roommate disputes, sexual harassment, Student Health Insurance Plan (SHIP), and stalking.

Undergraduate Cases by Parties Involved



Graduate Cases by Parties Involved

