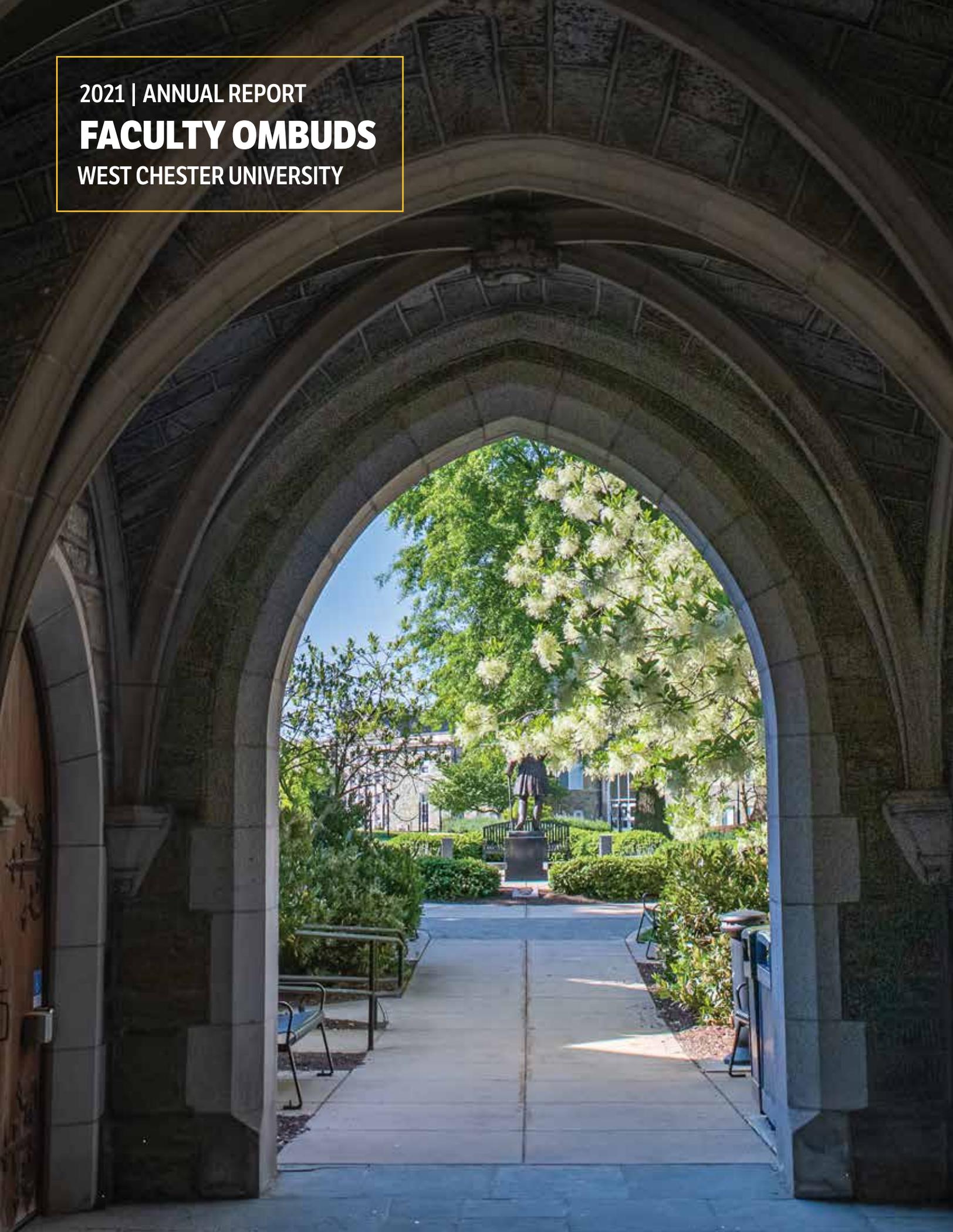


2021 | ANNUAL REPORT

# FACULTY OMBUDS

WEST CHESTER UNIVERSITY





## What is an Ombuds?

WCU's Office of the Faculty Ombuds is a free service for faculty that is impartial, independent, confidential and informal. It is a place to go for help resolving conflicts or issues arising in the workplace, based in principles of fairness and equity.

Historically, an Ombudsperson is a place to turn for concerns about how systems (e.g., governments) are functioning. In modern times, many universities established Ombuds offices during the various civil rights movements of the '60s and '70s. In all eras, it is an office dedicated to improving the lives of the members of its organization by helping to negotiate difficult working relationships, brainstorming about options, and helping to gather information so we can all be better informed and engaged members of our communities.

I see my role as three-fold: to listen, to strategize with the visitor, and to identify patterns and elements of concern within our organization in order to offer recommendations for positive change to our union and Administration. To that third end, this annual report will stand especially as evidence.

Dr. Vicki McGinley ([vmcginley@wcupa.edu](mailto:vmcginley@wcupa.edu)) serves as alternative WCU Ombuds for anyone so choosing.

### Note from the Ombuds

WCU's Ombudsperson Office was established in March of last year (2020), having been advocated for by our Faculty Senate, supported by upper administration, and approved of by our faculty union, APSCUF.

I am proud and honored to be able to serve our university community as the inaugural Faculty Ombudsperson. After more than 20 years at WCU, my

knowledge—albeit incomplete—of the workings of this university has proven invaluable in numerous conversations. Knowing where to go for answers to questions is a key part of this job, and this is a thank you to everyone I have reached out to for help finding those answers for visitors to the Ombuds Office. I want to personally thank all who have taken advantage of this new WCU resource. You are why this office exists and you are the proof of its worth. I

see this role as firmly embedded in the mission of the university "to focus on student success and institutional improvement . . ."

I appreciate APSCUF Executive Committee for approving of the Ombuds position, and am grateful to Faculty Senate for advocating for the position. The sincerest thank you to our Administration for recognizing the need.

*Joan Woolfrey, WCU Faculty Ombuds*

# Executive Summary

This report contains anonymized information about how the Office of the Faculty Ombuds has assisted mainly faculty since its inception in the Spring of 2020. The office will produce a report annually to communicate to the university community what our office does and how it is of value. This report also summarizes the kinds of activities sponsored or co-organized by the Ombuds Office. And, it delineates next steps for the Ombuds office as it works to improve its offerings and its functioning to best serve our campus community.

## *Anonymized Information*

To date (through the end of May 2021), the office has served 57 unique visitors. Many of those individuals, have used the office multiple times. As of the end of Spring semester 2021, 113 hours were spent in conversation with those 57 individuals. Some needed only a single 15-minute call, others have returned for multiple visits and several hours of phone or zoom calls.

Unbeknownst to anyone when the position was first announced, of course, was the serendipity of the official opening of the Faculty Ombuds Office coinciding with the pivot to remote learning due to Covid-19. Understandably, many of the first visitors to the office had pandemic-related issues: mental health and stress-related concerns, need to connect, need for information. Later in the pandemic, serious concerns about burn-out emerged, especially for parents (and in that category especially mothers) of young grade school-aged children). Helping them to connect to other parents or to services to help them cope, or just lending an ear in a truly untenable

circumstance, the Ombuds Office tried to play a role in making the pandemic more manageable.

It will be no surprise to anyone in academia that by far the most common issues that bring people to the office are interpersonal matters and conflicts. The International Ombudsperson Association offers nine different categories for categorizing visitor issues, such as Values, Ethics, and Standards, Services/Administrative Issues, and Career Progression and Development. Peer and Colleague Relationships ranks highest globally as the category most often brought to an Ombuds office. Regardless of the issue, though, the Faculty Ombuds Office is here to serve and to assist. No matter is too small and no question too complex. The more information gathered about people's needs and concerns, the more resources can be identified to meet those needs, such as programming and workshops.

## *Other Sponsored Activities & Events*

Because of several conversations coming through the Ombuds Office connected to the need to promote

classroom management practices that create safe spaces to navigate the many issues our nation and world were (and are) facing—the then-upcoming Presidential election, the Black Lives Matter protests, the challenges of teaching remotely, etc.—the Ombuds Office worked with the Office of Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (ODEI) and the Teaching, Learning and Assessment Center (TLAC) to offer workshops and open forums for faculty, which we did through the academic year. In addition, in collaboration with the Provost's Office, the Ombuds Office helped to sponsor "Listening about Race" sessions that the United to End Racism coordinators on campus (Drs. Michael Burns, Hannah Ashley and Ellie Brown) organized several times throughout the year. All of these events were held remotely, and served close to 150 faculty, all told.

As requests come in and as concerns are identified, the Ombuds Office will continue to develop events and workshops that respond to the needs of faculty, as they look out for the best interests of our students and the improvement of our institution.

## *Next Steps*

With more than a year to become established as an Ombuds Office, and with more than a year's worth of data gathered, the coming years will be focused on watching the trends, identifying patterns, and gathering additional information in order to improve and progress as a service to faculty and as an institution.

Over the summer, the Ombuds Office will be developing an anonymous survey in order to collect assessment data for the Office, and will update its website.



## The Year<sup>+</sup> in Review

The role of the Faculty Ombuds is three-fold: to listen (sometimes we just need to be heard); to strategize, explore options, gather information, and empower visitors to make choices; and, to collect anonymized information that over time can expose patterns and trends, and to recommend actions and policy changes that will better serve the university community. This first year-plus has been challenging and rewarding on all three fronts.

The main goals for the office for the spring of 2020, other than getting the proper training and establishing a web presence, was to introduce myself to the campus community as the new Faculty Ombudsperson. I met with the Deans of all the Colleges, and attended most of the Chairs or College Exec Committee meetings before the pandemic, and finished those meetings up virtually.

I met with library faculty, with Faculty Senate, and with all student affairs constituencies that would have a faculty component, such as the Center for Trans and Queer Advocacy and the Center for Women's & Gender Equity. Dr. Lisa Montgomery, WCU's Student Ombudsperson, and I were invited to New Faculty Orientation's virtual sessions last summer and we will be back for the in-person version this summer.

Obviously on a campus with a strong faculty union, much care has been taken in writing the office's charter and creating solid demarcation lines between union and ombuds business. I am invited each semester to Meet-and-Discuss, the meetings where APSCUF's Executive Committee and WCU's upper administration come together to discuss new and on-going issues. This is an opportunity to call attention to issues, give encouragement for work already being done, and to offer feedback from my vantage point. I am in close conversation with the APSCUF's Grievance Chair whenever the lines between union and Ombuds business appear to be to any extent gray. And those have always been extremely valuable and productive conversations.

Below are snapshots of the data sets so far accumulated of the anonymized data collected by the office.

## TRACKING UNIQUE VISITORS BY MONTH

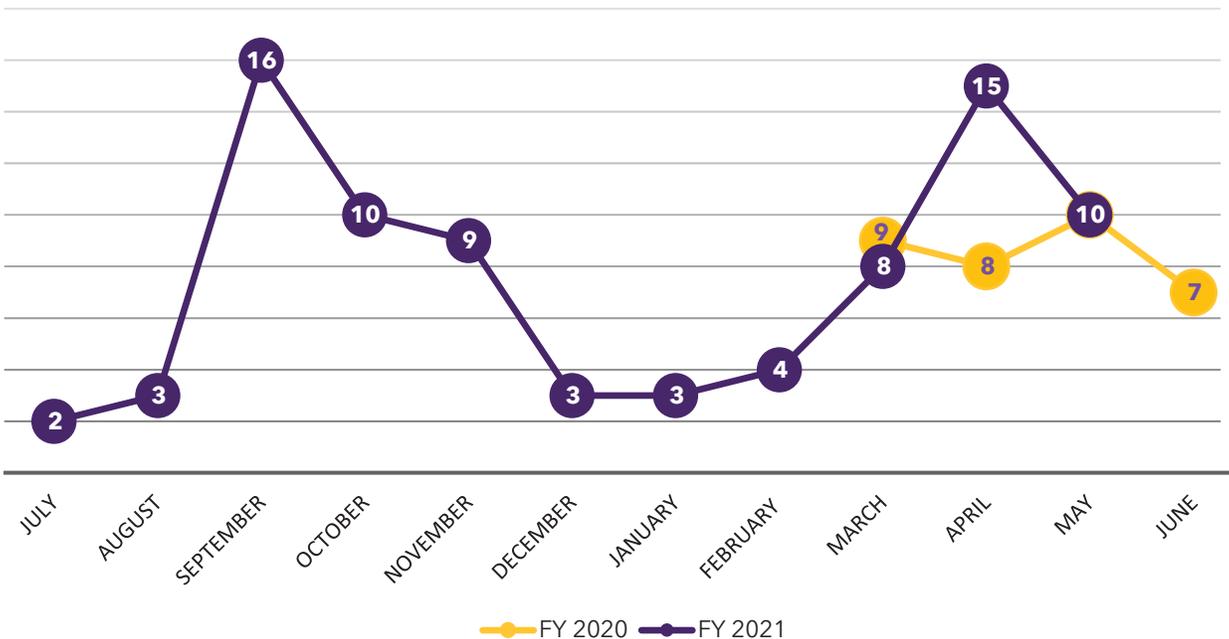
As more data is accumulated, these numbers will take on more meaning. As of now, the chart below reflects the total number of unique visitors coming to the Faculty Ombuds by month. The yellow line charts activity from Day 1 of the office opening, and the green line starts counting at the new fiscal, beginning July 1, 2020. Next year, we'll have two full year's data to compare and that will start to tell us the story that this data is only hinting at. Not surprisingly, visits surged at the beginning of the school year, in September. And, another surge was evident in April—as the term is winding down, as patience runs thin for some, as evaluation periods wrap up, and concerns about absent or reappearing students (especially relevant to

remote learning conditions and alternative grading policy issues) are coming to a head.

It is worth noting that several of these unique visitors were repeat visitors within any one month. As example, in August of 2020, there were 3 unique visitors, but 10 total zoom or phone calls to the Ombuds Office for the month. In March of 2021, there were 8 unique visitors, but 3 of them were single visits and 5 of those unique individuals had multiple visits to the office. So the 113 hours of clocked visits cannot simply be divided by the 57 total unique visitors. Some were one time 15 minute calls, and some visitors have used the Office of the Faculty Ombuds for dozens of hours across the months that this resource has been available.

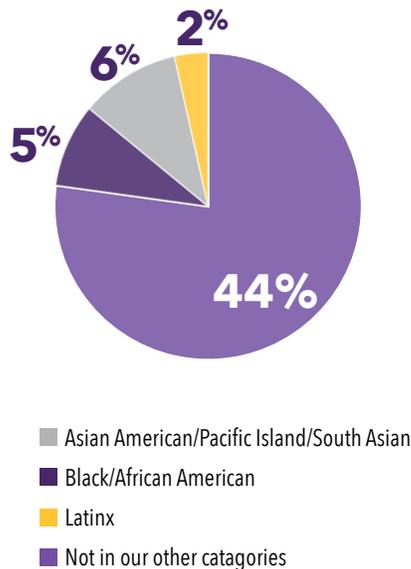
### Multiyear (Unique) Visitor Traffic

Office officially opened March 2020



## DEMOGRAPHIC BY RACE

March '20 - May '21



## VISITORS BY GENDER

March '20 - May '21



## VISITORS BY GENDER AND RACE

Data has been collected on both gender and race, as well as rank. The extent to which this is useful will only become clear over time with the accumulation of more data. One early observation is that diverse individuals have sought out the resources the Faculty Ombuds provides. As assessment and additional data is collected, those data points hopefully will become more informative.

In terms of gender, the category of Gender Nonconforming is waiting in the wings but will not be used as long as it is likely to defeat the goal of anonymity of this data. In terms of ethnicity as well, if identifying one's ethnicity would increase the likelihood of a loss of anonymity, those individuals are added to the category "Not in our other categories".

There were a total of 993 instructional faculty in 2019, according to WCU's most recent Office of Institutional Research Factbook (2020). (This is not

a perfect match for the population the Faculty Ombuds Office served because we started a few months into 2020, served non-instructional faculty, and did not turn away any non-faculty individuals who requested appointments. But, it is the most useful number for present purposes.) Of those 993 faculty, 47 or 4.7% identify as Black or African American. Eleven percent of the visitors to the Faculty Ombuds Office were Black or African American. There were 61 Asian, Asian American or Pacific Islander faculty at WCU in 2019, or 6.1 percent of the faculty. Thirteen percent of the visitors to the Office fit that category. Thirty-one faculty identify as Hispanic in the Factbook data set (or 3.1% of the total faculty). Two visitors to the Office were Hispanic or Latinx, amounting to 4.5% of the unique visitor traffic since the Office opened. It will be interesting to watch these numbers going forward.

And, lastly, it can be noted that 57 unique visitors out of 993 possible is a little less than six percent of the faculty

at WCU. Looking at randomly selected Faculty Ombuds offices elsewhere for comparison we find faculty visitors served at the University of South Carolina Faculty Ombuds Office numbered 49 in 2019-2020 out of a total number of 2,447 instructional faculty for a rate of two percent. Northern Arizona University Faculty Ombuds served 31 unique individuals in 2019-2020 out of a possible 1,782 which is 1.7 percent of the faculty. The University of Kansas in the same academic year served 58 unique contacts out of a possible 2,889 full and parttime faculty, which is two percent of the total. Our WCU numbers are during the Covid year which certainly may have spiked more need (and thus the opening of the office couldn't have been more timely), and these other schools' numbers are pre-Covid, so again, no conclusions are to be reached, but the Ombuds Office is eager for the coming years' numbers so comparisons can be made.

## VISITS TO THE OMBUDS OFFICE BY IOA THEME

The International Ombuds Association (IOA) has a set of “Uniform Reporting Categories” which can be found [here](#) (among other places). They are currently undergoing a third periodic revision and when the new version is available, it will be posted to WCU’s Faculty Ombuds Office webpage.

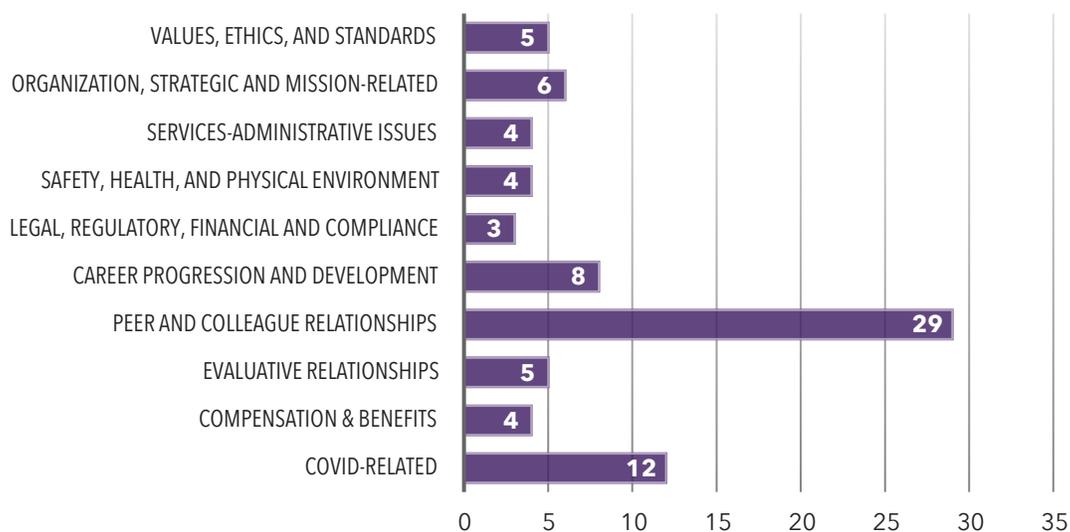
The above chart includes a “Covid-related” category, which of course does not appear as an IOA category. They could have been added to category 6 (Safety, Health and Physical Environment), but it seemed helpful to identify them separately. From the visitors who came to the office in the first few weeks of remote learning—and later—on pandemic-related issues arose (amongst other things) the awareness of a need to find ways for faculty and staff with families to offer support for each other and share advice. Following the success of the [Ramprofs Online Facebook Group](#), the [WCU Families Facebook Group](#) was established

with the help of Dr. Ola Kopacz from the Communication Studies Department, and word-of-mouth and Faculty Ombuds emails have brought membership up to 169. Other Covid-related activities are discussed below.

This report will not comment on each of the IOA categories, but it is worth noting—while unsurprising—that the most common issues coming to the Ombuds Office are related to #3 Peer and Colleague Relationships. Misunderstandings and lack of transparency are repeated concerns. Feeling disrespected or unheard or not sought out for one’s particular expertise also surfaced regularly. Differences of opinion on how programs or departments are run was not an uncommon conversation in the Ombuds Office. These sorts of issues are not unheard of in most organizations, but as the Ombuds Office gathers more information, building programming that can provide tools for some of the more common issues or problems will be a part of the functioning of this office.

### IOA\* Themes to Ombuds Office

March '20 - May '21



\*International Ombudsperson Association



## OTHER OMBUDS ACTIVITIES

Collaborating with Dr. Tracey Robinson, WCU's Chief Diversity Officer, and Dr. Janneken Smucker, Faculty Associate for the Teaching, Learning and Assessment Center (TLAC), to run workshops Dr. Robinson had originated and successfully run through the Office of Diversity, Equity and Inclusion previously—Teaching in Turbulent Times—we shepherded close to 60 faculty through three different workshops. From there, we identified 21 people who were willing to identify as Faculty Allies within their own departments to be a resource for others when difficult conversations or issues came up. Those names are listed on the [TLAC website](#). Numerous resources are also available through the [Office of Diversity, Equity and Inclusion](#)—of course!

We also heard that people wanted Open Forums where they could share strategies, bring concerns, and simply connect with others during a very isolating time. Dr. Smucker and I held five different Open Forums allowing for those connections. Approximately 30 faculty took advantage of those opportunities. With the hiring of Kristin English, WCU's Digital Learning Fellow, some of the issues on people's minds during remote learning will now be funneled through

her office. And the Faculty Ombuds can be a bridge to communicating with her wherever needed. She is offering, amongst other things, opportunities for strategizing about how the pandemic may have changed our pedagogy—often for the better, so I encourage everyone to watch for news from her office.

Another direction for Faculty Ombuds support based on faculty concerns about difficult conversations in the classroom and how to be most supportive of students of color in these trying times, was the "Listening about Race" sessions, sponsored by this office and supported by the Provost's office. The local coordinators of the international organization United to End Racism are Drs. Michael Burns, Ellie Brown and Hannah Ashley, and they led these sessions. With the leadership of Dr. Burns, eight events were held over the course of the academic year, serving close to 80 faculty who came to the scheduled Zoom sessions looking for guidance, community, and understanding. And, I want to thank Dr. Burns especially, but also everyone who came and participated and took something away from those conversations.

There are a handful of other projects currently in progress, and they will be reported on next year.

## SUMMARY

The goals for the future of this office are to provide high-quality services to WCU faculty, provide more on-line resources through the website, continue involvement with the IOA, and increase programming and outreach.

## NEXT STEPS

Creating an anonymous assessment tool is a high priority, and will be ready shortly. Updating the website and providing more resources there is also a goal. Continuing to accumulate knowledge and training through the offerings of the International Ombuds Association is an on-going task.

Responding to the needs of the faculty will always be at the forefront of what the Faculty Ombuds Office does. Taking the lead from who comes to the Office for what purpose will guide future projects. Meanwhile, the ubiquitousness of Zoom has changed the options for serving the WCU community, so evaluating the need for office space will be a piece of the puzzle in the coming months as well.



*And, I will end with again expressing my appreciation for the faculty leaders who helped establish this office, for those who have made this office valuable by using its services, for upper administration (especially Senior Vice Provost Jeffery Osgood) who have been pleasingly open to the function and goals of this office, and to APSCUF Exec who have been excellent collaborators.*