



Annual Report 2022 - 2023



Ombuds Office

UNIVERSITY OF COLORADO **BOULDER**

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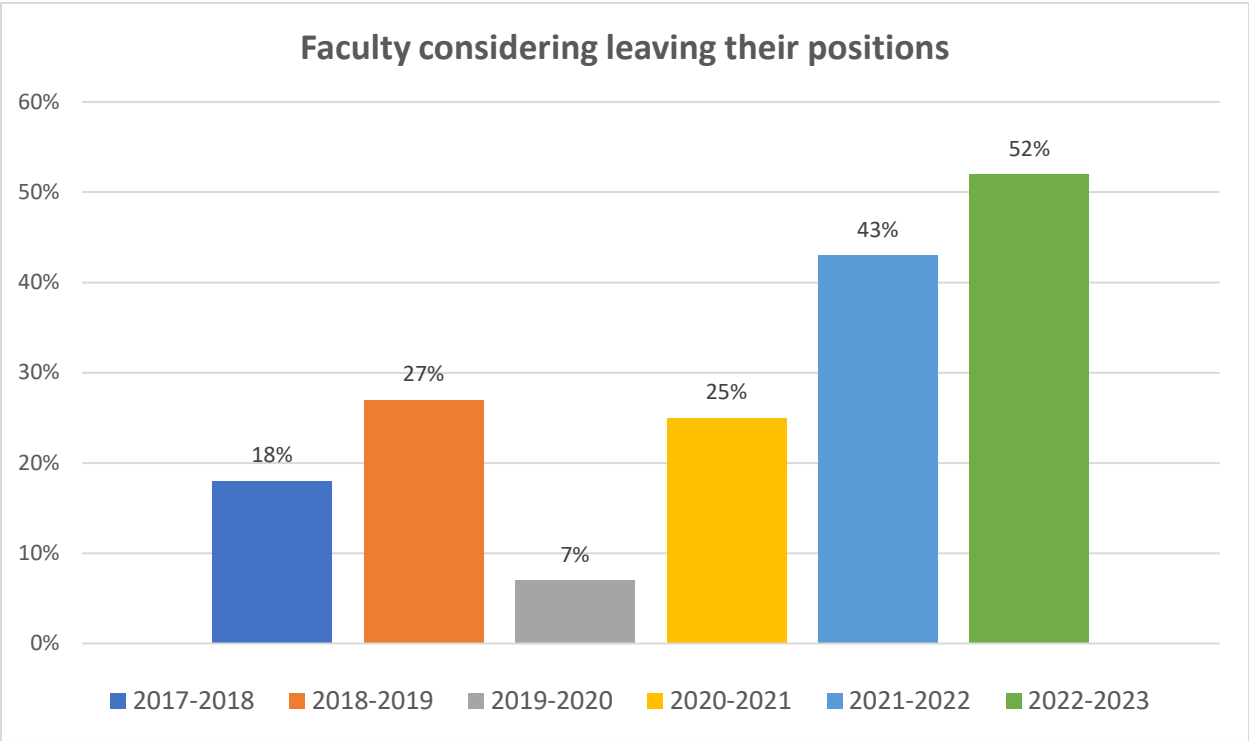
A Message from the Director

The University of Colorado Boulder Ombuds Office is a team of skilled professionals dedicated to promoting the highest standard of university governance, furthering the university's commitment to the principles of equality of opportunity; and providing confidential and anonymous guidance on how to report violations of the law and policies. The Ombuds Office is trained to help CU faculty, students and staff identify options to resolve conflicts and disputes and without breaching confidentiality, the Office identifies policies, practices, and emerging trends for the university where systemic change may be appropriate.

In fiscal year 2022-23, hybrid working and instruction became more codified and predictable. Both courses and employee recruitments included specifics on whether they require in-person, remote, or hybrid engagement. Although we still saw a tension between employees wanting more remote work and departments wanting less, there was a significant decrease in these conflicts. We attribute this to guidance from human resources, faculty affairs, and academic planning and assessment.

The number of people seeking consultations has held steady this year at 465. Our online presence has also continued strong. Significantly, 45% of our visitors self-identify as having a minoritized gender, racial or sexual identity, or a disability compared to 28% last year. We are very pleased at this increase and see this is as an important metric to follow, since the campus is making significant efforts to improve the climate. The increase that we see here, combined with the Campus Culture Survey (CCS) and the Faculty and Staff Engagement survey results can shed light on community building efforts are working, and what areas need attention. In particular, the CCS has specific findings on how individuals experience a sense of belonging on campus. We encourage all departments to look at their dashboards to see how they fare and consider the changes that may help their departmental climates.

Of the faculty who filled out our feedback survey, 52% indicated they were thinking of leaving their positions, an increase of nearly 10% from last year's 43%. This figure aligns with the 2023 Faculty Engagement Survey which reported that 51% of faculty had a favorable view of the university's efforts to retain faculty, which means that 49% did not view retention at CU favorably.



While these numbers are very high, there may be two factors at play. A third of our faculty are eligible for retirement and so, reasonably, might be thinking of retirement. Another influence may be the impact of remote working. Post-pandemic, some universities are recruiting for remote positions that would allow our faculty to live here and work elsewhere. So, while 52% may be thinking of leaving their positions, university data show that in FY 22-23 only 10% actually left their positions according to Faculty Affairs statistics.

Similarly, 58% of staff who filled out our survey indicate that they want to leave their positions. This is much higher than the 38% the campus engagement survey shows. We believe our survey shows a higher number because the staff who access our services are experiencing difficulties in their work life. Actual staff turnover was 13% according to HR statistics. In the 2023 Engagement Survey, staff satisfaction is extremely high. This is why we believe that the high number of staff considering leaving versus actually leaving may reflect the abundance of opportunities available in our area.

Twenty-five percent of our cases dealt with abrasive conduct. We have had a 7% decrease since FY 2017-18. Many people on campus are continuing to contribute to this decline. We see positive impacts from: admonitions from the provost and EVC-COO, Faculty Relations education on the Professional Rights and Responsibilities document, and Organizational and Employee Development department education on supervisory skills. Ombuds office work in conflict coaching, mediation, coaching for abrasive leaders, and providing leaders feedback on departmental climate, has also been a key piece of this work. We believe that the decrease in abrasive conduct is a significant contributor to the increase in people indicating in the 2023 Engagement Survey that CU Boulder has changed for the better since 2019.

We maintain close collaboration with many campus departments so that referrals to and from our department can be done easily. This year the office received 226 referrals from other campus departments and referred 221 people to resources and services in other departments. Staff Career Development has been a highlight, as many of our staff visitors were helped by the program. We believe that the program has retained many capable staff at CU Boulder who would have left otherwise.

We continue to provide trainings and presentations for numerous campus departments for students as well as faculty and staff. Many presentations are repeatedly requested every year. We also attend many welcome events across campus and continue to offer our well-attended lunch and learn series [Small Bites, Big Impact](#).

Through our work, we are continually striving to identify options for both individuals and the campus to build an ever more positive community.

Respectfully Submitted,

Kirsi Ahmavaara Aulin, LMFT, CO-OP® Director



Executive Summary 2022-23

About the Ombuds Office

The University of Colorado Boulder Ombuds Office is an organizational Ombuds program designated as a confidential, informal, impartial, and independent resource available to all members of the CU Boulder Community and adheres to the International Ombuds Association's Standards of Practice and Code of Conduct.

Top Five Values: 2022-23

Healthy Conflict Engagement

- Communication Coaching
- Conflict Coaching
- Model constructive approaches
- Mediation
- Restore relationships and build trust.

Reputational Awareness

- Help the university and individuals avoid unnecessary reputational harm
- Help visitors report misconduct.

Liability Mitigation

- Elevate whistle blower concerns and mitigate lawsuits
- Share timely information with leadership
- Detect and illuminate compliance gaps and glitches.

Identify and Surface Trends and Systemic Issues

- Spotlight organizational disconnects
- Provide credible insights.

Organizational Strategist

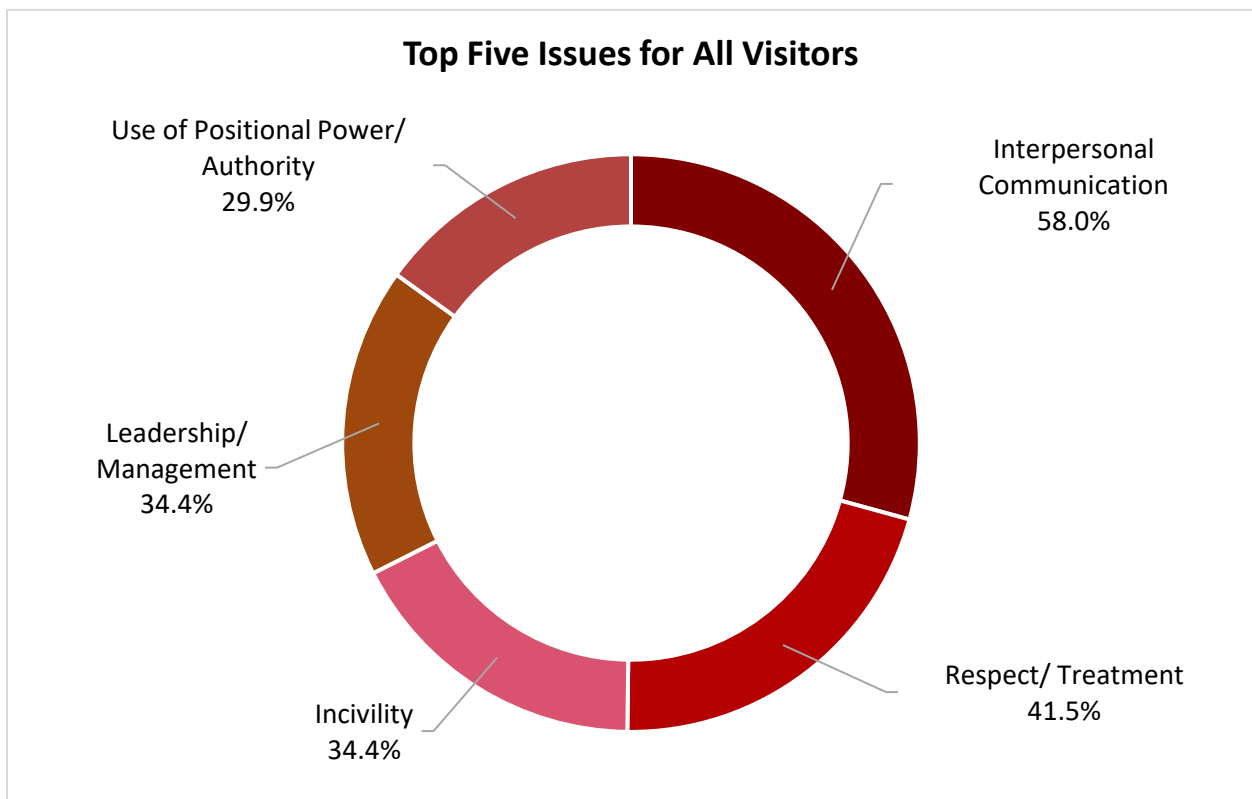
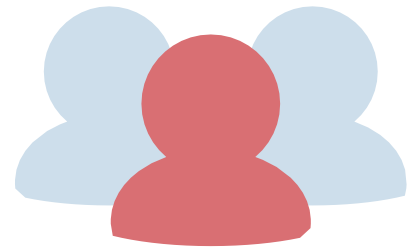
- Help individuals navigate university systems, processes, and procedures
- Identify and refer to campus resources.

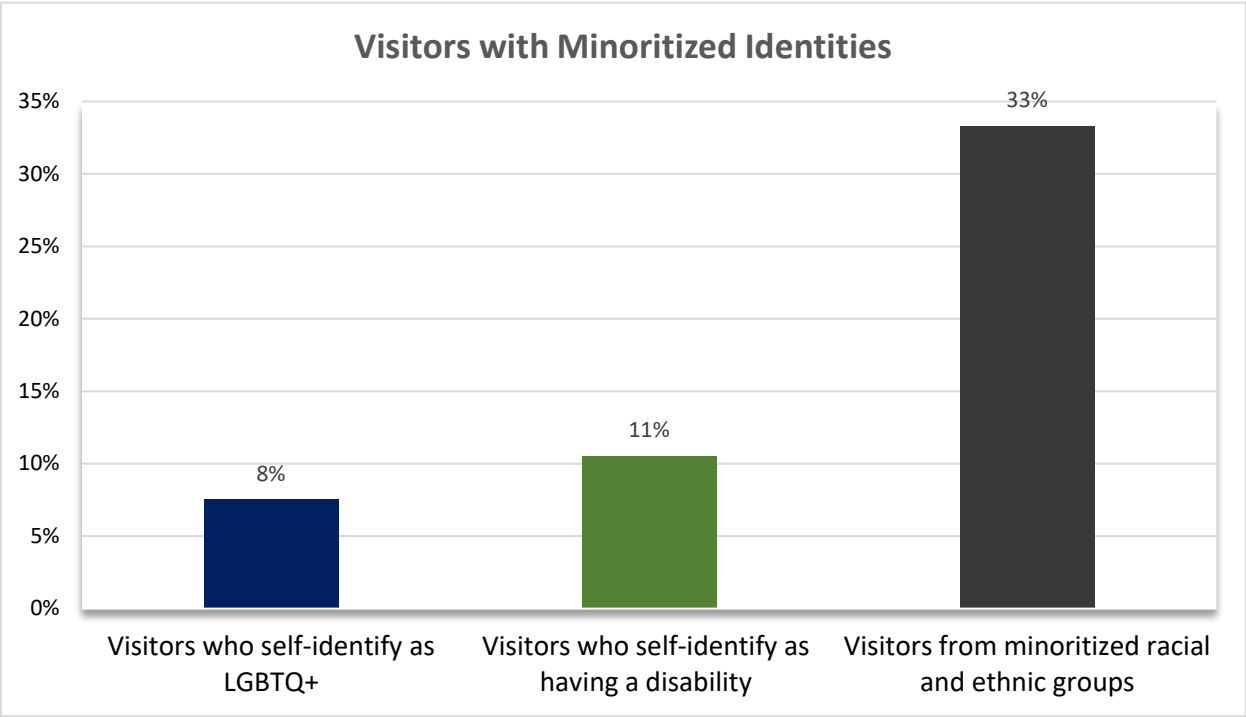
Visitors

465 visitor consultations

1525 people directly impacted

3743 people indirectly impacted





Outreach

30 presentations, workshops, and webinars

1,565 attendees

6 “Small bites. Big impact.” Lunch and Learns

286 attendees

577 YouTube video views

51 YouTube subscribers

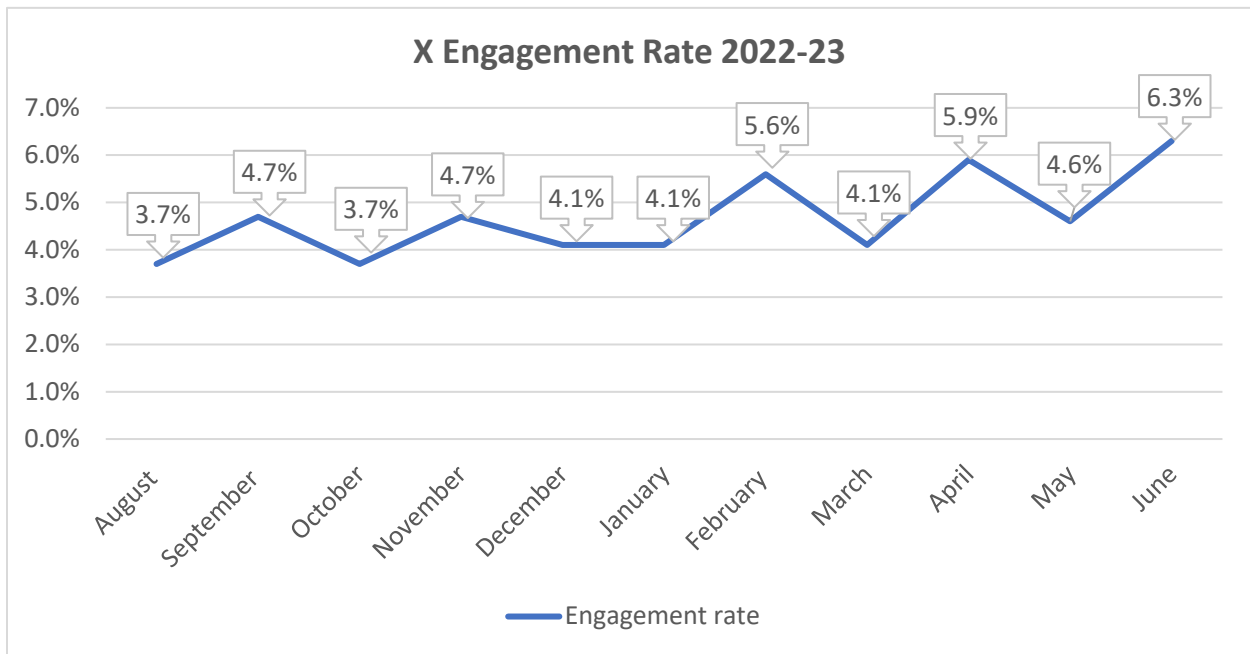
9,202 Ombuzz page views (July 1, 2022 through February 28, 2023)



X

The Ombuds Office is on X (formerly Twitter) at @CUBoulderOmbuds. The platform is used to share resources, publicize Lunch and Learns, disseminate information, and engage with other campus units.

In FY 2022-23, the engagement rate improved by 2.6%. Engagements encompass all interactions with the posts, such as clicks, reports, likes, poll votes, and hashtag clicks. The median engagement rate for X users is 0.037%. The office X account also received 48,343 impressions. Impressions denote the number of times Ombuds Office tweets appeared in users' feeds. This metric is a valuable indicator of tweet success, reflecting its reach and impact.



Demographics and Data Summary

In FY 2022-23, 465 people from the following groups requested assistance from the Ombuds Office:

- Staff: 143 (31%)
- Graduate students: 103 (22%)
- Faculty: 58 (12%)
- Undergraduate students: 56 (12%)
- Researchers: 30 (6%)
- Unknown: 30 (6%)
- Academic Administrators: 23 (5%)
- Other: 22 (5%).

The self-identified gender of individuals consulting with our office has remained consistent over the last four years:

- Female: 55%
- Male: 35%
- Gender diverse: 2%
- Unknown: 8%.

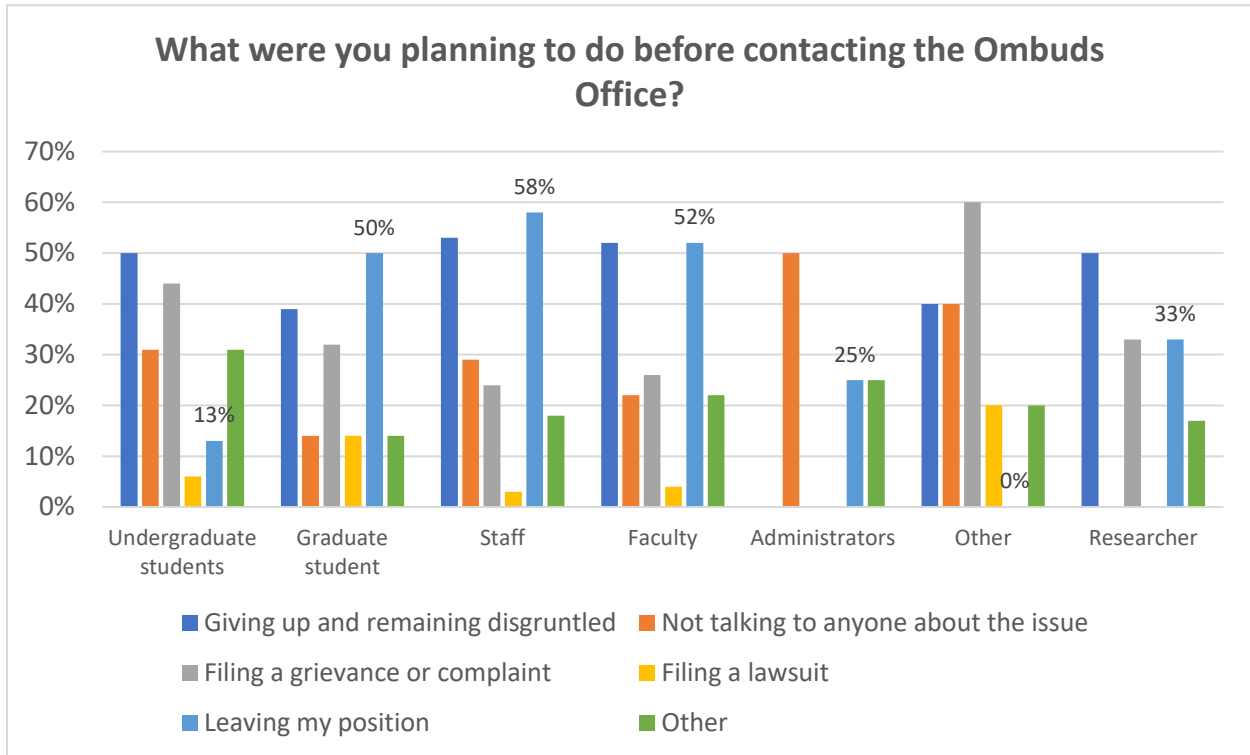
The self-identified racial and ethnic identity of our visitors is also consistent compared to last year:

- White, Caucasian, European American: 64.5%
- Asian, Asian American, Asian Indian: 5.8%
- Native American, Pacific Islander, Oceanian American, American Indian, Alaska Native: 1.1%
- Latino, Hispanic, Spanish American: 2.6%
- African American/Black: 3.2%
- Biracial: 0.9%
- Mexican, Mexican American, Chicano: 2.6%
- Middle Eastern, North African, Arab, Arab American: 1.7%
- Multiracial: 2.2%
- International: 1.3%
- Decline to state/Unknown: 14.1%.

Assessing and mitigating risk

At the end of a consultation, visitors are asked to fill out a questionnaire identifying what they were planning to do about their concern before coming to the Ombuds Office. The response rate was 26%, an increase of 12% from last year.

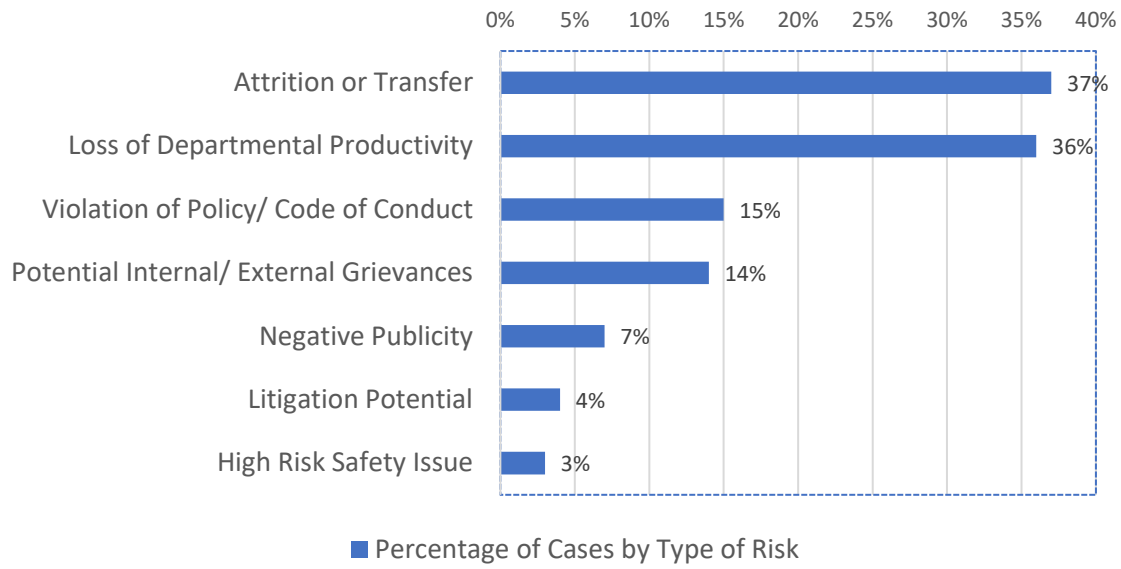
Significantly, 54% of the graduate students, staff and faculty who completed the survey, said that before they contacted ombuds, they were considering leaving their positions.



Ombuds Assessment of Risk

Once a case is closed, the Ombuds handling the case assesses the potential risks the case represents for CU Boulder as well as for the visitor. Over the past four years, *loss of departmental productivity* and *attrition or transfer* have been the risk categories most often noted, and this holds true again this year.

Ombuds assessment of risk



Observations

The Ombuds Office worked with academic departments, student groups, and campus wide constituent groups to help resolve problems.

After each visitor consult, the fundamental areas of concern presented are captured. In FY 22-23, 58% of visitors needed assistance with *interpersonal communication*. For all groups incivility is also a top concern. This aligns with the results of the 2021 Campus Culture Survey (CCS) which shows that 46% experienced at least one incivility behavior.

Undergraduate students

This fiscal year, the Office consulted with 56 undergraduate students. 57% of the students who filled out the demographic questionnaire self-identified as part of a minoritized racial or sexual identity, as gender diverse or having a disability.

The top five concerns for undergraduate students were:

- Interpersonal Communication
- Administrative Decisions and Interpretation/ Application of Rules
- Retroactive Withdrawal
- Grading
- Mental Health Concerns.

For undergraduate students there was an emphasis on administrative processes, as they sought assistance to either guide them through administrative processes or for help when they were experiencing problems with these processes. Ombuds helped students understand how administrative processes work as well as how to strategically engage with these processes.

Most undergraduates found the Office through referrals from Student Affairs departments, advisors, faculty, or the Office of Undergraduate Education.

Staff

The Ombuds Office was contacted by 143 staff members. Among them, 30% identified themselves as part of a minoritized racial or sexual identity, as gender diverse or having a disability. The primary concerns of the staff, in descending order, were:

- Interpersonal Communication
- Respect/ Treatment
- Leadership and Management
- Departmental Climate

- Incivility.

Although the total number of staff seeking assistance is lower than in the previous fiscal year (171), it closely aligns with the figures from FY 2019-20 (143) and FY 2020-21 (140). Notably, the ranking of the top five concerns varied, with respect/treatment and leadership/management alternating between the second and third positions.

Three identifiable trends emerged from the data:

- Challenges in navigating team relations – peer to peer and supervisor/supervisee.
- Tensions arising from remote work. Management wanting less and staff wanting more.
- A perceived lack of agency in role and responsibility, particularly in light of new supervisors and the evolving office landscape. Staff expressed experiencing "work creep", a term used to describe a situation where work responsibilities gradually expand beyond their initial scope or boundaries. The incremental increase in workload or job expectations, without a corresponding increase in compensation or acknowledgment, resulted in burnout, stress, and an imbalance between work and personal life.

Faculty

Of the 58 faculty visitors, 22% self-identify as part of a minoritized racial or sexual identity, as gender diverse or having a disability. Faculty concerns occurred in interactions with graduate students, researchers, colleagues, administrators, and staff.

The most common issues faculty raised were:

- Interpersonal Communication
- Respect/ Treatment
- Administrative Decisions and Interpretation/ Application of Rules
- Abrasive Conduct
- Use of Positional Power and Authority.

Interpersonal communication breakdowns can create negative work environments and affect departmental climate. Interpersonal communication breakdowns also led to complaints about lack of respect, a common observation in past reports. Notably, faculty members experienced lack of respect in working with graduate students who were resistant to mentoring, disrespectfully challenged external collaborators, failed to prepare for or attend scheduled meetings, or expected outcomes that differed from established programmatic protocols.

A number of faculty visitors reported inhospitable environments for minoritized populations. This trend follows concerns about issues of race, gender, and social inequalities reported in last year's annual report. They also expressed concern that the Dean/Chair was not addressing climate issues such as:

- Misogynistic, transphobic, or racist behavior

- Gendered communication by colleagues towards female colleagues
- Fear of retribution for whistleblowing
- Abrasive behavior toward collaborating faculty or departmental staff.

Specific concerns about administrative decisions and interpretation of rules included:

- A feeling of disrespect caused by administrator incivility and inaction
- Administrator's lack of transparency, misrepresentation, and even fabrication of university policy and/or departmental procedure, especially regarding tenure, promotion, and search procedures
- Public shaming in faculty meetings, and public intimidation with false rules
- Unwillingness by chairs and deans to address concerns about chronic abrasive behavior or unprofessional behavior perceived as violating the Professional Rights and Responsibility (PRR) policy.

As in the past, faculty visitors reported that when these concerns were brought to the unit administrator's attention, no action was taken. An underlying dynamic in these reported behaviors is an imbalance of power and the perception of inappropriate behavior being condoned. These two concerns—abrasive behavior and the chair's failure to use positional power to address it—are regarded by faculty visitors as creating untenable work situations.

Faculty members continued to express concern over lack of transparency about departmental processes and opaque administrator decisions. Specifically, these involved personnel actions such as contracts, appointment and promotion, and administrative support for stipends, issues most often brought to the Office by teaching faculty.

The concerns over department climate, perceived insensitivity to matters of race, gender, and ability, and abrasive behavior carried a common theme. Faculty visitors complained that they could not count on their chair to insist on adherence to the Professional Rights and Responsibilities policy. We note, however, based on other evidence provided by visitors, that administrators seemed more likely to reference the revised PRR than in previous years and to communicate more generally acceptable behavioral norms, in keeping with the PRR policy.

Graduate students

The number of graduate students visiting the Ombuds Office was 103, one more than the previous year. 57% self-identified as a member of a minoritized group, as gender diverse, or having a disability. This was an increase of 15% from last fiscal year. 50% of the graduate students who filled out a feedback survey indicated that they were considering leaving their program.

The top concerns for graduate students:

- Interpersonal Communication
- Advisor/ Advising
- Incivility

- Abrasive Conduct
- Respect/ Treatment.

Interpersonal communication and advisor/advising continue to be the primary concerns for graduate students. A new concern, incivility, has risen as the top third concern, which correlates to the graduate student findings in the 2021 Campus Culture Survey (CCS). Like the CCS' three most reported incivility behaviors, graduate students visiting with the Ombuds reported:

- Non-responsiveness to emails/requests by faculty advisors
- Condescension or dismissive remarks
- Demands of excessive sacrifices of the students, time, health, or social life.

Graduate students also reported instances of abrasive conduct, lack of respect and use of positional power and authority when describing conflicts with advisors, principal investigators (PIs) or staff in departments or labs. As in past years, graduate student visitors reported frustrations about departmental or lab culture. Some described comments and microaggressions they felt bordered on discriminatory behavior. Many graduate students also reported being in therapy or taking time out due to mental and physical stress coping with graduate school.

Issues raised regarding lab environments:

- Abrasive behavior by the PI such as belittling or shaming in public; dismissive or angry responses to student's presentations in the lab
- Use of positional power by the PI to prioritize the PI's personal research interests at the expense of graduate students' degree progress
- Polarization in the lab due to perceived racial inequities, such as preferential treatment of one group over another leading to distrust of the PI
- Safety concerns about protocols and use of lab equipment
- Safety concerns around violent behavior of other students or unwanted advances by others when out in the field.

Researchers

The number of researchers who visited the Ombuds Office was 30. This includes individuals with the titles of Research Professor, Research Associate, Professional Research Assistant and Postdoctoral Fellow and Scholar. The Ombuds Office recognizes there are power differentials that result in very different concerns held by the various ranks in the university's Research Group series. For reporting purposes, however, the Ombuds Office uses the general term "researchers," to capture overall trends and issues.

20% of researchers self-identified as members of a minoritized racial or sexual identity, as gender diverse, or having a disability. This is a significant increase from the prior year.

The top concerns for researchers:

- Interpersonal Communication
- Respect/ Treatment
- Leadership and Management
- Abrasive Conduct
- Departmental Climate.

Interpersonal communication concerns frequently resulted from organizational restructuring or a change in leadership in the lab. Researchers who visited the Ombuds Office pointed to lack of transparency, widespread misperceptions, and poor unit communication. Researchers negatively experienced actions and comments from supervisors or former supervisors that made them feel disrespected or diminished or treated unfairly.

Some researchers reported being moved from projects and subsequently being marginalized due to disagreements over work expectations. For example, if the parameters for obtaining data significantly changed, researchers were expected to work evening hours or to be physically available locally. In some cases, researchers were excluded from meetings, breakdowns in communication followed and researchers felt unable to resolve a situation that differed drastically from their initial work agreements. Researchers feared retribution or loss of employment if they made formal complaints. Concerns about their reputation in the field and subsequent publishing opportunities were also major stresses.

Issues cited included:

- Poor change management communication
- Perceptions of micromanagement
- Culture of the lab or unit perceived as unsupportive
- Lack of respect displayed by leadership
- Lack of or missing leadership in day-to-day operations
- Fear of retribution if complaints are put forward
- Project leads seen as inconsistent in providing access to professional development opportunities and collaborators
- Contract agreements were not honored; researchers were moved off of projects and denied access to data they contributed to
- Intellectual property disagreements such as not being given proper credit.

Administrators

The Ombuds Office was visited by 23 administrators in 2022-23 compared to 10 in 21-22, 11 in 20-21, and 17 in 19-20. Of these 4 or 17% identified as minoritized sexual or racial identity. In some cases—7 of 23—administrators consulted about communication issues in their units. These ranged from interpersonal issues with a specific faculty member or departmental administrator to group issues, such as those between graduate students and faculty responsible

for delivering a program or conducting laboratory research. These issues occasionally involved perceptions of incivility or abrasive communication and had a negative impact on others within the unit.

The top concerns for administrators were:

- Interpersonal Communication
- Respect/ Treatment
- Abrasive Conduct
- Incivility
- Use of Positional Power and Authority.

Chairs sought advice on how to address unprofessional and disrespectful faculty behavior toward them, such as public shaming at faculty meetings, and refusal to accept the chair's exercise of fiduciary responsibility. Administrators also sought guidance on dealing with conflicts in the unit. In some cases, they needed coaching on how to supervise staff.

A common concern among chairs was the need for advice on how to negotiate problems among graduate students.

Examples were:

- Challenges to leadership and management
- Lodging unfounded allegations, not taking facts into account
- Incivility in lab settings
- Dealing with difficult students and graduate students complaints in general
- Graduate students engaging in abrasive and harassing behavior toward other students
- Graduate student unhappiness towards their programs of study and CU Boulder.

A specific concern we heard in 2022-23 was student discontent due to the perception they were not being respected or treated fairly. Administrators often noted that the current cohort of graduate students poses challenges to the faculty in terms of expectations concerning evaluation, criticism, DEI, and climate. In STEM disciplines this often surfaces in student perceptions that lab cultures lack inclusivity. These voiced concerns, in turn, sometimes precipitated conflict between graduate students and faculty, as well as between faculty colleagues over student concerns surrounding faculty sensitivity to DEI and social justice issues where these intersected with the curriculum, research, departmental climate, student expression, and the profession.

Other

This category captures visitors who are connected to the university but are not part of any on-campus constituency including parents, alumni, spouses, former students, and community members. Fourteen of the 22 visitors in this category were parents. Ten out of 22 were referred to us by other campus departments.

Concluding Remarks

The Ombuds Office continues to serve as an active, informal, and confidential resource for alternative dispute resolution and mediation for the CU community. This year we have continued to productively serve the campus as the university moved to greater in-person instruction and hybrid work arrangements. We have adapted to hybrid work arrangements by continuing to offer Zoom and in person appointments.

The number of visitors to our Office remains consistent with the previous year. Of the visitors who completed a feedback survey, 97% said that they would use the Ombuds Office again or would refer others to the office. Visitor numbers, along with feedback surveys and referrals from other offices, indicate that we are seen as a secure place to discuss difficult conversations. 22% of our visitors had consulted with us previously, and 226 out of 465 visitors were referred by others to the Ombuds Office.

Difficulty with interpersonal communication as well as abrasive and uncivil behavior were common themes this year. These themes also appeared in the Engagement Survey, particularly for faculty. Several departments contacted the Office to seek assistance with problems involving departmental culture as well as concerns about unprofessional behavior. The most frequent issues centered on managing difficult conversations, sometimes due to positional power and other times due to demeaning and abrasive behavior. Problematic interactions ranged from unclear and unexpressed expectations to gender, disability, and racial insensitivities. Forty-three people participated in mediations this year.

In the spirit of creating connections and contributing towards the community at CU Boulder, we provided workshops, presentations, and Lunch & Learn webinars to 1,508 attendees. Many gained valuable skills that will shape their future leadership. The CCS informs us that a sense of belonging helps community members feel their presence makes a difference. We believe that our efforts foster a greater sense of belonging by fostering connections, offering shared experiences, and building confidence. These elements help people feel accepted, valued, and supported within the CU Boulder community. We look forward to working with old and new partners across campus this coming year in person and online.

Appendices

Appendix A: Definition of an Ombuds

What is an Ombudsman (Ombuds)?

The name “ombudsman” comes from old Swedish and literally means “representative.” At the most fundamental level, an ombuds (om-budz) is one who assists individuals and groups in the resolution of conflicts or concerns. At CU Boulder, the Ombuds Office is affiliated with the professional association International Ombuds Association (IOA), and Certified Organizational Ombuds Practitioners® (CO-OP®) which is the certifying body for Organizational Ombuds, and it adheres to IOA’s standards of practice and code of conduct. The IOA defines an Organizational Ombuds as: “a designated neutral who is appointed or employed by an organization to facilitate the informal resolution of concerns of employees, managers, students and, sometimes, external clients of the organization.” At CU Boulder, the Ombuds Office has been designated to serve this function as a confidential, informal, impartial, and independent resource available to all members of the CU Boulder community.

Appendix B: Standards of Practice and Code of Ethics

[We adhere to the International Ombudsman Association’s Standards of Practice and Code of Ethics](#)

Appendix C: 2021 Campus Culture Survey

[CU Boulder Campus Culture Survey 2021](#)

Appendix D: 2023 Faculty and Staff Engagement Survey

[CU Boulder Faculty and Staff Engagement Survey 2023](#)

Appendix E: Small Bites, Big Impact Lunch and Learn

[CU Boulder Ombuds Office, Lunch and Learn program, *Small Bites, Big Impact*](#)

Appendix F: Ombuzz Blog

The Ombuds Office stopped publishing Ombuzz in March 2023; however, Liz Hill and co-founder Teresa Ralicki rebranded the blog and continue publishing every other week. It is available at [Ombuzz.blog](#).

Appendix G: CU Boulder Research Faculty

[Guidance by CU Boulder Human Resources on Research Faculty](#)

Appendix H: Professional Rights and Responsibilities

[CU Boulder Office of Faculty Affairs, Professional Rights and Responsibilities document](#)