

2021-22 Report of the Ombuds for Graduate Students

June 1, 2021 through May 31, 2022

Submitted to the UNC Charlotte Graduate School
by
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Ombuds to Graduate Students

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Report of the Ombuds for Graduate Students (2021-22)

This report details the activities of the Ombuds for Graduate Students for the period between June 1, 2021 and May 31, 2022 and includes information about the number and types of activities as well as some insights regarding the interactions with graduate students over the past year. In particular, this report provides information about the types of consultations provided to students and issues that brought them to the Ombuds.

The Ombuds had 41 student consultations in 2021-22, a slight decrease from the number of consultations (44) held in 2020-21. Figure 1 provides a breakdown of consultations by college (units) in 2021-22. The greatest number of consultations over the past year was with graduate students in the College of Computing and Informatics (N=10) followed by the College of Liberal Arts & Sciences (N=9) and College of Health and Human Services (N=7). The College of Engineering and the College of Education had five (5) students seek consultations respectively.

Figure 1. Consultations in 2021-22 by college

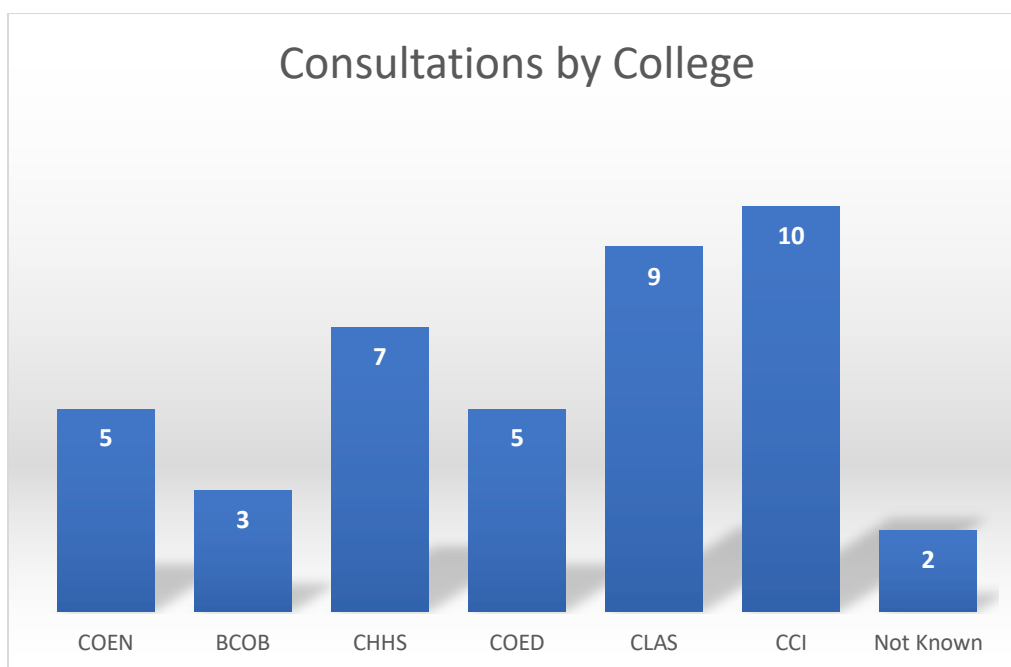


Figure 2 provides a breakdown of consultations by month. A greater number of consultations were scheduled in Summer and Fall terms with peaks in August, September and November. There were fewer consultations during the Spring term. This differs somewhat from previous years where peaks occurred in late Fall and late Spring, near the end of semesters.

Figure 2. Breakdown of consultations by month (June 2021-May 2022)

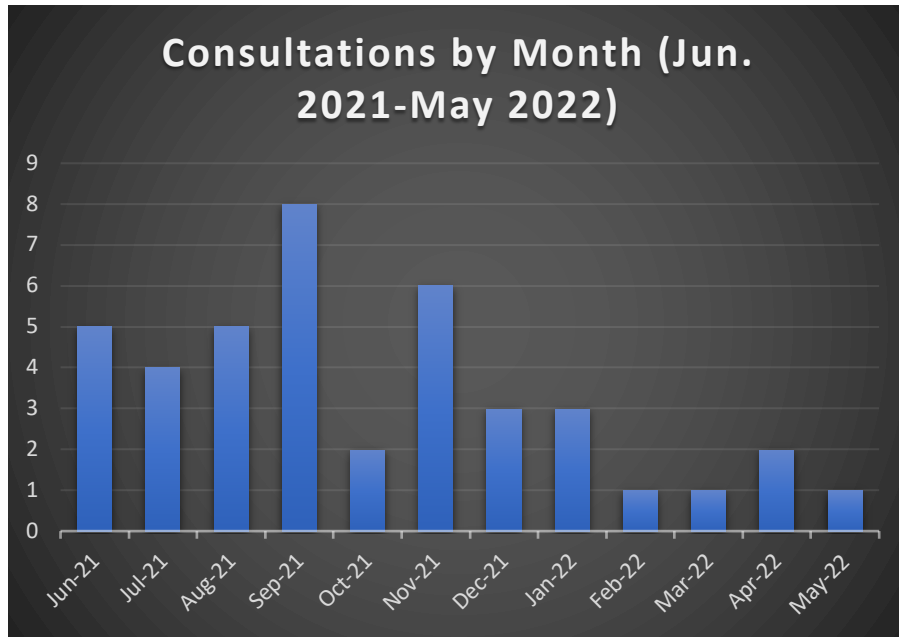
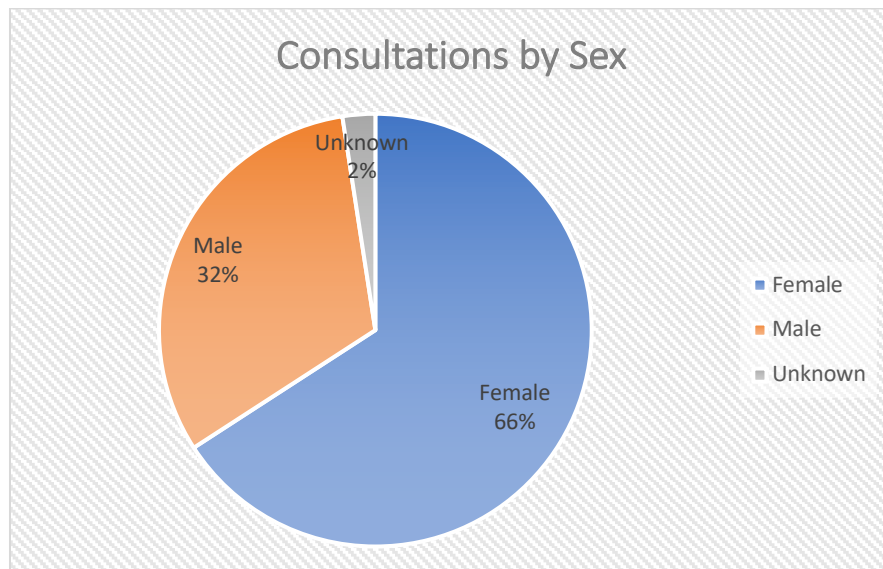


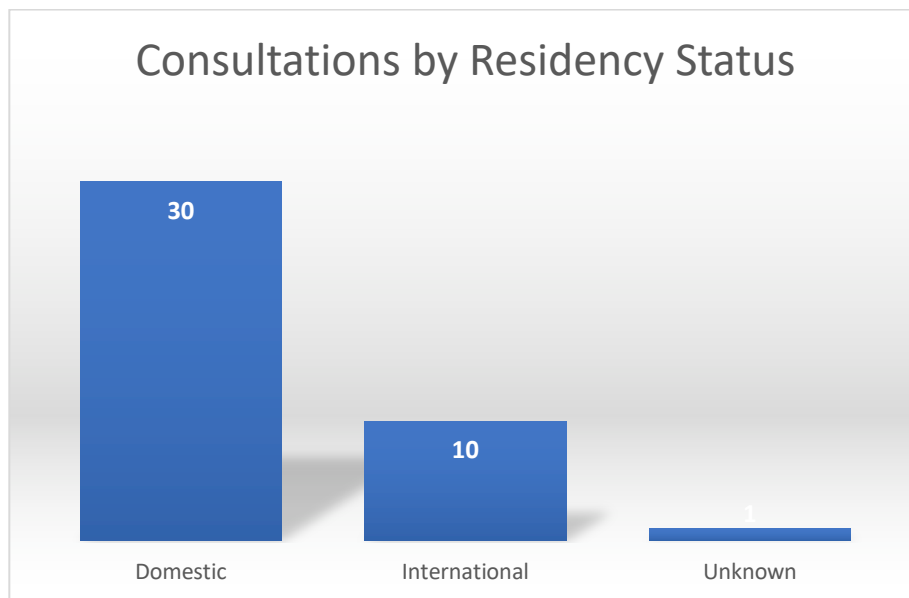
Figure 3 and Figure 4 provide demographic information about consultations. Well over half of the graduate students meeting with the Ombuds were women (66%) while 73% of students were registered as domestic students. These percentages differ from previous years as well with far more women making appointments for consultations in 2021-22 than in previous years. In years past the split by sex was closer to 50/50.

Figure 3. Breakdown of consultations by sex



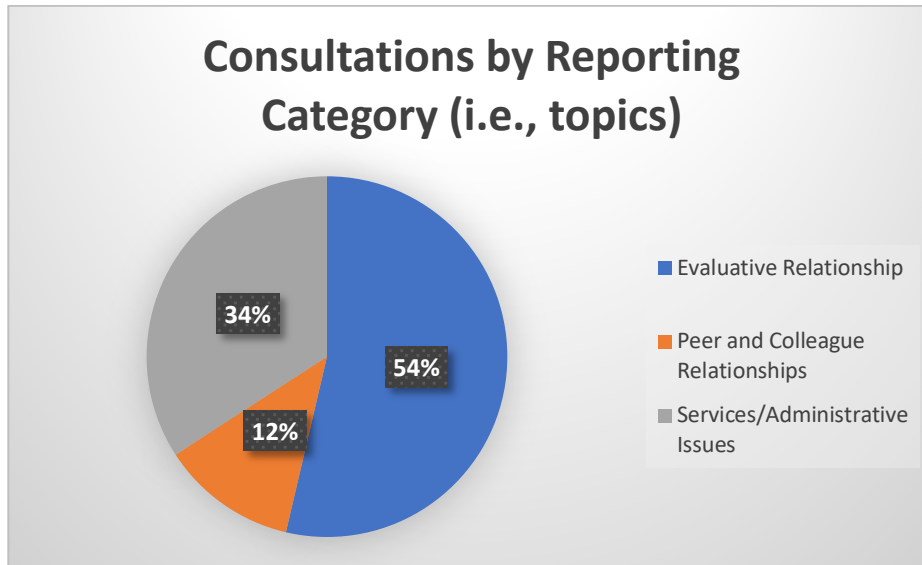
The number of consultations by residency are far different than prior years where 50% or more of students coming to the Ombuds office were International. It's hard to know what brought about this reduction in outreach from international students (or, conversely, the increase in outreach from domestic students).

Figure 4. Percentage breakdown of Ombuds consultations by residency status



The International Ombudsman Association (IOA) provides a list of uniform reporting categories that can be used to identify the types of issues brought to the Ombuds. These include issues dealing with *Evaluative Relationships*, *Service and Administrative Issues*, and *Peer & Colleague Relationships* issues to name three of the nine categories. These categories are used by the IOA and its members to track interactions and work by Ombuds across settings including higher education, healthcare, government, and business to cover a range of issues including many that relate more to employer/employee issues. Just over half of the student consultations with the Ombuds, 54%, dealt with evaluative relationships. Most often these are issues between a graduate student and faculty member where there is a power differential between the two. Examples include issues about research or class assignments but the greatest number deal with conflicts related to dissertation work. Administrative issues represent 34% of the issues and peer relationship issues (student to student) the other 12%. Administrative issues include policies related to appeals, grades, and conduct that do not deal with conduct between faculty and students. While peer relationship deals with conflict between students including disputes.

Figure 5. Consultations by Reporting Category (i.e., broad categories)



Conflict with advisors is one of a common challenge for which graduate students seek help in navigating. Students share that lack of communication and support for dissertation research lead to delayed progress or, at times, an impasse in moving forward. Students also describe what they see as a conflict between faculty research and their academic progress. For example, balancing their role as a research assistant on a faculty led project that delays progress on dissertation research. Students describe a variety of challenges related to communication with faculty and advisors including faculty who are on leave from the university, travel abroad, or do not respond to requests to meet. These situations often leave students feeling as they are in a state of limbo, unable to make academic progress. Disputes also arise with instructors over grading and communication about assignments—particularly, not getting feedback or grades in a timely fashion. It is important to understand that the Ombuds typically hears about these issues from the student and rarely from faculty involved, but conflict over student research and progression to graduation is among the more common issues facing graduate students who seek consultations with the Ombuds.

Disputes between students is less common than with faculty but accusations of cheating, not contributing equitably to or communicating about projects, and concerns about comments including racial slurs made by other students in or out of class were brought to the Ombud’s attention this last year. One case that involved domestic abuse was referred to the Title IX office.

Many inquiries or concerns deal with administrative issues including GASP funding, assistantships, courses timing out, and needed a leave of absence. Of note this year was how changes to Policy 50.5 impacted students funded by grants amounting in some cases to a reduction of \$10,000 in funding that has previously been promised and provided. Students described how changes to Policy 50.5 came about suddenly and with little communication.

COVID, while less an issue in 2021-22 than the previous year, was still an element of concerns raised by some students. For example, students who had been delayed in doing research or fulfilling internship requirements earlier in their programs faced complications in completing their degrees. Mental health issues were a concern in many of the consultations with the Ombuds. While the Ombuds does not keep statistics on this and cannot make a determination about mental health issues, there seemed to be an increase in students dealing with stress, anxiety, and depression—so much so, that the Ombuds set up an appointment with the director of Counseling & Psychological Services (CAPS) to discuss the issue. The outcome of this was that the Ombuds attended trainings provided by CAPS.

Observations & Themes

Below are some key themes and observations related to student concerns raised with the Ombuds in 2021-22.

- Conflict with faculty, often over research, continues to be a leading concern among graduate students—doctoral students in particular. From the student perspective, a lack of support or communication can delay academic progress. At a more concerning level are perceived conflicts of interest between faculty research and student research—particularly, when doctoral student research for their dissertation is delayed by faculty research. Concerns over authorship and student roles on grants and publications arise as well. The authorship guidelines adopted this last year may help these disputes. There is an imbalance of power between faculty and students making many students reluctant to address concerns. Processes for addressing this often include going to the department chair or associate dean. It could be helpful to have a mediation process for students when issues arise with faculty.
- Students also expressed concerns about courses when instructors do not communicate about assignments or fail to provide meaningful or timely feedback on assignments. Students describe being uncertain about their progress or grades.
- Funding was a particular concern among graduate students due to changes in Policy 50.5 and funding packages offered to students who work on grants. From their point of view, what they had been offered changed and reduced their effective income substantially in some cases.
- Mental health concerns continue to be a significant issue for graduate students. CAPS is a vital campus partner and needs resources to support students but greater communication about these issues and how to support students would be helpful.