Dear faculty, staff, and students,
As we end what was surely one of the most challenging fiscal years in our institutional memory, I am pleased to offer this annual report from the Office of the University Ombuds. I hope that the report will provide a useful overview of the office's work and insight into the types of issues with which UWG constituents have sought assistance during the past year.

The Ombuds Office is here to serve as a sounding board and conflict management resource for all members of the campus community. No issue or concern is too small to bring to the office. Consultations are confidential, and early consultation can help prevent issues from escalating.

I look forward to continuing to work with you throughout the coming year.

Dr. Julia L. Farmer
University Ombuds
Ombuds Office Overview

The Office of the University Ombuds has been established to provide an accessible, informal space in which members of the campus community can seek assistance with navigating challenges or conflicts. The Ombudsperson works to help students, faculty, and staff think through difficult situations, express concerns, and find answers to questions about University policies, procedures and practices in an independent, impartial and confidential manner.

The Ombudsperson also promotes conflict management and cooperation throughout the University community through outreach and trainings. When requested, the Ombuds can facilitate informal conversations between parties who may find themselves in conflict.

In their dealings with visitors, the Ombuds will act with integrity and will advocate, not for any individual, but for fairness, equitable treatment, and respect throughout the University community. The Ombuds adheres to the Code of Ethics and Standard Operating Practices of the International Ombudsman Association and serves as a sensor and resource person in identifying systemic institutional problems.
A visitor is defined as someone who contacts the Ombuds Office to seek assistance with a challenging situation or concern. Visitors are counted only once per case, no matter the number of actual meetings or conversations.

**Total Visitors FY 21**

- **Parents**: 2.8%
- **Students**: 25%
- **Employees**: 72.2%
- **Unknown**: 3.7%
- **Graduate**: 25.9%
- **Staff**: 46.7%
- **Faculty**: 53.3%
- **Undergraduate**: 70.4%

**TOTAL VISITORS: 108**
**UNIQUE CASES: 81**

Additional constituents served through workshops, trainings, and discussion groups: Approximately **120**
Visitors by home area

Academic Affairs faculty and staff*

Students*

Other Divisions*

*Faculty and staff are categorized by area of employment, and students are categorized by college where they are housed, when known. Many issues brought to the office involve relationships or offices outside of the person's home area.
Note: Cases often involved multiple issues.
IOA Uniform Reporting Categories:
Primary Employee Concerns

Primary issues: Faculty

- Values, ethics, and standards: 4.5%
- Legal, regulatory, financial, and compliance: 4.5%
- Safety, health, and physical environment: 22.7%
- Evaluative relationships: 36.4%
- Peer and colleague relationships: 27.3%
- Compensation and benefits: 4.5%

Primary issues: Staff

- Values, ethics, and standards: 4.5%
- Legal, regulatory, financial, and compliance: 4.5%
- Safety, health, and physical environment: 22.7%
- Evaluative relationships: 36.4%
- Peer and colleague relationships: 27.3%
- Compensation and benefits: 4.5%
IOA Uniform Reporting Categories: Primary Student Concerns

- **Values, ethics, standards**: 13%
- **Services/Administrative Issues**: 21.7%
- **Legal, Regulatory, Financial, and Compliance**: 8.7%
- **Peer/colleague relationships**: 13%
- **Evaluative Relationships**: 43.5%
In nearly all cases, the Ombuds provides the baseline service of active listening and assistance with weighing the pros and cons of possible paths forward. The chart below represents additional types of assistance offered, based on choices made by the visitor throughout the consultation. In some instances, more than one type of assistance per case was offered.

**Conflict coaching:** Assisting the visitor in thinking about ways to manage or productively resolve the conflict on their own.

**Facilitated conversation:** The Ombuds serves as a neutral third party in guiding a mediated discussion between two or more people.

**Shuttle diplomacy:** The Ombuds goes back and forth between parties in order to facilitate communication, rather than all parties sitting down together.

**Group training:** Many trainings and workshops offered by the Ombuds Office are simply opportunities for professional development for employees and students. In certain cases, a group training may be requested in response to a specific case or situation. The graph above refers only to the latter.

**Policy guidance:** Assistance with locating relevant policy and explaining its applicability to visitor’s situation.

**Referral:** After discussing options, some visitors decide they would like to pursue a formal option, such as appeals, grievances, investigations, etc. The Ombuds may also refer visitors to offices that can assist them with some sort of service. While the Ombuds can refer the visitor to these sorts of offices, she cannot participate in any formal processes herself.
Trend Analysis

As would be expected, caseload this past fiscal year was clearly impacted by the Covid-19 pandemic. Covid was a factor in nearly 20% of cases. Covid-related cases involved everything from concerns about equity in work-from-home arrangements to issues around possible academic dishonesty in online courses, concerns about mask-wearing or lack thereof, stresses related to increases in workload, and more.

There was a particularly notable increase in student usage of the office in the past year. Student caseload was up approximately 80% from the year prior. This increase may be attributable at least partly to the Ombuds' Office increased outreach efforts to let students know that it is available to them as a resource.

Graduate and undergraduate students tended to seek different sorts of assistance from the office. Undergraduates were more likely than graduates to seek assistance in navigating the on-campus services offered to them and to request help clarifying different sorts of requirements and policies. Graduate students were more likely to make appointments to discuss issues related to internships, practicums, and the like. There were multiple cases related to disagreements between faculty and students in online courses for both groups.

As is evident from the graphs on previous pages, interpersonal concerns were prevalent for both faculty and staff. Indeed, employees were much more likely than students to reach out to the office to discuss peer/colleague relationships. When employee concerns involved evaluative relationships, faculty tended to be more likely to consult with the office regarding relationships with their supervisors, while staff were more likely to seek assistance in working with supervisees. It was in these sorts of interpersonal cases where conflict coaching often proved beneficial.

In terms of assistance offered by the Ombuds Office, conflict coaching was frequently requested by both employees and students. When visitors requested direct Ombuds involvement in working with all parties, students were more likely to request that the Office engage in shuttle diplomacy, while employees were more likely to request facilitated discussions. Referrals and policy guidance were also more common with students than with employees.
In addition to serving visitors, the Ombuds Office serves as a professional development resource for employees and students. Below are some examples of sessions with groups conducted during FY 21.

- Navigating Conflict as a Leader (LeadWest series, CSI)
- Coping with Covid Conflict
- Know Your Conflict Style
- What Do We Actually Want? Positions vs. Interests
- Perception Checking as a Tool to Avoid Misunderstandings
- Tactics for Starting Difficult Conversations
- Mediation Training
HelpWest is an assistance program dedicated to providing emergency relief to eligible UWG faculty and staff who are facing unforeseen financial hardship. The fund is overseen by the HelpWest committee. Funds come from donations.

In order to maintain confidentiality, requests are processed through the Ombuds Office. When cases are sent to the committee for approval, no identifying information is included.

To donate or request assistance, visit westga.edu/HelpWest

Funds Distributed: $3350

Cases by Division:
Academic Affairs: 4
Administrative Services: 3
• It gave me valuable feedback on my department which helped me in decision making and being able to help the employees appropriately.

• The Ombuds is an excellent listener who made sharing easier than I thought. She was always available and provided valuable suggestions for available resources on campus to help me address the conflict. I appreciate the wealth of knowledge, experience, and professionalism she demonstrated throughout the process.

• I have relied on the Ombuds on several occasions to give me sound advice on some very difficult issues. Dr. Farmer is a wonderful resource for our faculty and staff.

• I felt heard. Sometimes it's easy to feel that a problem or a concern is just all in my head so I appreciated just being heard. My experience with the Ombuds helped me better understand my concerns and see options.

• The ombuds was able to advise me on how to handle the situation. Without the ombuds, I would not have known the appropriate steps to take or how to navigate the processes.

• Helped me talk through and reframe my concern in such a way that I was able to deal with the people and personalities involved more productively.

• The Ombuds made contact with professionals at another institution to discuss my situation. I liked that the Ombuds made an effort to seek additional feedback on my issue.

• My issue was new to Julia but she jumped in and found some information that was helpful. She handle my concerns time sensitive. Julia showed great concern of my issue. I was given more information to pass on to other resources to whom can help me with this issue and hopefully other students of UWG.

• It was really nice to have a place to come just to talk with someone. I trusted the Ombudsperson to provide a fair and neutral assessment of my situation, and I felt heard and respected.

• It was nice to have a sounding board -- someone with whom to bounce around ideas about how to diffuse the situation I was in.

• She was a very good listener and having to articulate my concerns also really helped. She was invaluable.

• Dr. Farmer was kind and thoughtful. She listened and did not rush our appointment.
Outreach is a key component of the Ombuds Office function. In addition to the group trainings and workshops mentioned earlier, the Ombuds Office endeavored to spread the word about its services through various other means as well. A sampling is below.

- Developed Ombuds Office LibGuide in partnership with Ingram Library
- Participated in Wing it With Wolfie to welcome students back for spring semester
- Offered several tabling sessions at Newnan Center
- Participated in "Healthy Relationships" outreach with Office of Community Standards and Peer Educators
- Presented to SGA on the role of the Ombuds for students
- Presented to Staff Advisory Council on the role of the Ombuds for employees
- Partnered with HR to send information on the Ombuds Office to all new employees
- Partnered with group of employees who serve as mentors to students, both to offer assistance and to continue learning about other student-centered services
- Attended various department meetings to speak about the Ombuds Office and its role on campus
- Created Ombuds Instagram account mainly targeting students. (There were already Ombuds Facebook and Twitter accounts.)
Standard 4.7 of the International Ombudsman Association Standards of Practice states that "The Ombudsman acts in accordance with the IOA Code of Ethics and Standards of Practice, keeps professionally current by pursuing continuing education, and provides opportunities for staff to pursue professional training."

In keeping with this standard, the Ombuds participated in multiple professional development opportunities throughout the year, including the following:

- Completed five-day International Ombudsman Association Foundations Course
- Passed the national exam to become a Certified Organizational Ombuds Practitioner (CO-OP®). [Certification in progress]
- Presented at IOA annual conference
- Attended meetings of the Cal Caucus of College and University Ombuds
- Completed Mental Health First Aid for Work training from Kaiser Permanente
- Demystifying Ombuds Work by Presenting Data for Impact (Kennesaw State U)
- Ombudsing and Covid-19: Contemporary Challenges and Future Opportunities (Kennesaw State U)
- How to Effectively Manage Workplace Conflict (Quartz)
- Helping Visitors Raise Concerns About Bullying (Kennesaw State U)
- How to Promote Disability Inclusion at Your Workplace (Quartz)
- The Future of Workplace Dispute Resolution (Labor and Employee Relations Association)