

ANNUAL REPORT

Office of the Student Ombudsperson

The University of Chicago

Max M. Freedman, AY 2020-2021

The Office of the Student Ombudsperson was established in 1968 to offer students peer-provided confidential, neutral, and independent information and help in navigating the University. The Office continues to consider ways to improve the service it provides, but the core goals remain the same. First, the Office seeks to provide students with information they have difficulty accessing themselves. Second, the Office works to facilitate resolutions to student concerns involving faculty, administrators, or other students.

2020-2021 was a year with many unique staffing challenges, including onboarding a new Ombudsperson after the year had begun. Moreover, the Ombudsperson's Office successfully reopened under university mitigation guidelines for limiting the spread of COVID-19. Students who needed to meet in-person for privacy reasons or for internet access reasons were able to do so. An ongoing area of improvement for the Office will be outreach to ensure that students who need us know we are here for them for both virtual and in-person meetings. This year, the Ombudsperson held town hall meetings with the Biological Sciences Division Dean's Council and with graduate students in Anthropology.

Over the period beginning with Summer Quarter 2020 and ending in Spring Quarter 2021, more than 55 students contacted the office. They spanned a diverse array of undergraduates, doctoral students, professional students, and parents of students needing assistance. Graduate student inquiries came from students in most divisions, but Biological Sciences Division, Physical Sciences Division, and Humanities Division were overrepresented.

Students brought a wide array of concerns to the office this year. Students in the College brought a number of concerns related to grading policies, grade appeals, assistance with incompletes, and academic rules such as when work can be assigned and when it can be due as well as when and how often a professor can drop assignments that have already been turned in and graded. Especially as the College completes its transition to a new, nine-week quarter, it would be beneficial to communicate clearly to students whether assignments are permissible over the Thanksgiving break and whether work can be assigned or due, during or over, the reading period. The student experience may benefit from allowing reading period to buffer the quarter from the exam period such that new work may not be assigned during the reading period, assignments may not be due during the reading period, and work from prior to reading period may not be due during finals if an exam is also to be given.

Doctoral students, particularly those with laboratory components to their studies, sought help navigating relationships with their advisors. The anonymity the Ombudsperson's office provides allowed several to explore changing advisors without fear of reprisal before knowing whether a switch was feasible. However, many more doctoral candidates generally would like to make

relationships work with the advisors they have rather than switching. Department Chairs have been helpful, but ultimately, the lack of a policy against retaliation chills student willingness to seek help from Chairs even with the Ombudsperson's involvement. The Chair will need identifying information to help and without reprisal protections, doctoral candidates understandably see far more downside than upside from making a formal grievance. This Office strongly supports the ongoing efforts of the Provost's Committee on Grievance Policies and hopes that they will consider this as part of their work.

In both Graduate and Undergraduate contexts, the Office observed a number of issues of miscommunication between faculty and students. It appears as though a year and a half of virtual or hybrid modalities have shifted more communication online leaving certain social nuances more difficult for parties to read. Faculty and students alike should be commended for their efforts to make the most of an incredibly challenging situation. Likewise, assuming that fellow members of the university community are well-intentioned and communicating in good faith would do much to improving relationships on campus.

In closing, this year was unlike any other year in the university's history, and everyone should be commended for their efforts to maintain our distinctive academic culture while mitigating the spread of COVID-19. The Ombudsperson's Office adapted well to providing services in dual modality and will likely continue to offer Zoom meetings as well as in-person meetings moving forward. The Office will continue seeking ways in which to provide creative resolutions and track trends in student complaints while zealously guarding confidentiality and neutrality.