

## Report of the Student Ombuds Office Winter & Spring 2022

This is the second and last report for the academic year 2021-22. Even though we proposed making quarterly reports in the previous report, with the new, compressed academic calendar in place, we decided that semiannual reports are desirable over quarterly reports, for they allow more time for observation of trends and reflection. One of the major projects that occupied us in the last two quarters was the rechristening of our office as the Student Ombuds Office. When we filed our previous report, the office was still called the Office of the Student Ombudsperson. Now, we have not only a contemporary name but also a visual identity (see the letterhead). We hope this change will make the office more modern, accessible, relatable, and student-centric. The staff in the office have also been re-designated as Student Ombuds and Associate Student Ombuds. This is perhaps the first major change in the office since it was established in 1968. Yet, we continue to uphold the core principles—neutrality, confidentiality, fairness, equity, and justice—in our work and remain prepared as ever to call out injustice and inequity on campus. We would like to thank the President’s Office (which gave us the financial support), UChicago Creative team (for designing the logo), and Michelle Rasmussen and Anne Hartman from the Campus and Student Life for working with us to rechristen the office.

The last two quarters have continued to show the trends we saw earlier in the year. That is a large majority of the cases we saw pertain to academic issues, particularly about exams, coursework, and grades. We received a total of 50 cases, of which 30 came from college students, and the rest mainly were from graduate students in divisions and professional schools. We also received cases from a wide array of non-student populations like alumni, postdocs, faculty, staff, and UChicago parents. Postdocs often fall through the cracks, for they are neither students nor faculty or staff and hence cannot avail of the services that are clearly earmarked for students, faculty, or staff. We recommend that all the academic divisions with their Ombuds offices make their services available to their respective postdocs.

We are delighted to note that the Office of the Provost has acted on the recommendations of the Graduate Student Grievance Committee and has established a new associate director level position (now occupied by Amanda Young) in UChicago GRAD to implement the recommendations of the Committee, and to recommend resolutions to problems relating to graduate students. Given the gradual attenuation of graduate teaching and the consequent increase in the number of postdoctoral fellows (through Teaching Fellowship programs in the Humanities and Social Sciences Division, for example), this new office should also be open to postdocs and teaching fellows in the university. This is especially so for divisions without their Ombuds Offices or those divisions that do not extend their services to the postdocs. As all the services and facilities of UChicago GRAD are open to postdocs, it is only reasonable that they are provided resources for conflict resolution as well.

The cases that we saw in the last six months include academic conflicts (both inside and outside classrooms); COVID-related problems; concerns about various processes and procedures relating to

Leave of Absence, Probation, Academic Dishonesty, dormitory room change; procedures relating to obtaining accommodation through the Student Disability Services; concerns about Canvas (online instructional platform); roommate conflicts (both graduate and undergraduate); parents disowning students and thereby leaving their children penurious; demand for change in shuttle routes; continuing concerns about the lack of authorship agreements and financial management system for RSOs, to name some.

In what follows, we highlight a cluster of issues that have come up, sometimes more than once, and our recommendations on those issues.

*1. Need for better communication of and easy access to academic policies*

We received a plethora of questions from the college students relating to matters as diverse as whether they could have an exam graded by another faculty to questions about if it's proper to have coursework due during the reading period or finals week to questions about incompletes, schedule conflicts, and GPA. These are just representative and not an exhaustive list of issues students raised with us. This shows that students are increasingly relying on us to supply them with academic information that we ourselves do not possess. While we are happy to be available to the students to answer these questions, we think that academic advisors and instructors are the right people to impart this information to the students. Academic advisors should be able to foster a friendly relationship with the students so that students turn to them for academic matters even when they might be afraid that their questions or concern might put them in a bad academic light. We recognize that college advisors have tens (or hundreds) of students under their watch, and it would not be ideal if students turned to them now and then. But academic matters are important, and it would be in everyone's interest if students were encouraged to turn to the right people to seek accurate information.

We continue to see questions arising from instructional policies, especially regarding assignment deadlines and grading. As we noted last time, both students and instructors have an equal role in ensuring that as much clarity as possible exists about instructional and course policies. This means that instructors should not assume putting course policies on the syllabus absolves them from the responsibility of verbally or electronically clarifying course policies on and off, and students should not hold back questions about course policies until the last week of the quarter and should plan for course assignments well in advance.

Instructors' in-class conduct has also been brought up as insensitive and disrespectful, especially as COVID had impacted some students unevenly. Instructors should be able to ask for medical certifications of mental and physical distress and, if supplied with that information, should be willing to provide accommodations to students. On the other hand, students should be equally willing to communicate with their instructors about the factors that prevent them from learning well in the class. We often see that letting a problem fester only leads to worse outcomes. We hope that classrooms become spaces where students and instructors can communicate freely and understand each other. Given the autonomy that instructors enjoy in teaching, many of these minor issues, including temporary accommodations, can be done on a case-to-case basis, and an open, friendly communication channel between students and instructors will go a long way in this regard.

We also saw concerns from both college and professional school students about exam policies. If a student claims that they have taken an exam and have been graded, but if the instructor or the TAs have no record of that exam, there is a quandary. Having seen such a case, we wonder if it is possible to have a more foolproof system for conducting exams by ensuring that students' attendance could be confirmed later. This could be done through simple techniques like passing a sign-up sheet around or by instructors/teaching assistants walking around the room and doing a head count/identifying the absentees on the spot. We were also approached with concerns regarding the lack of anonymity in the exams conducted by the Harris School in their EMP program. It seems that the program promises anonymity in exams, and yet students were asked to enter their name and student ID number on exams. EMP students also felt there was no consistency in grading practices, with students often not being told why they deserved a particular grade.

### 2. *Concerns relating to PhD students*

We saw two sets of concerns with regard to PhD students: advisor-advisee conflict and residency requirement. Conflict with an advisor, or a committee member, has been a perennial issue among PhD students. There is no one-size-fits-all solution to this problem that can apply to all departments and divisions as the intellectual and work culture in academic units vary greatly. We have consistently noticed that the fear of retaliation and anxiety about their academic future are the most critical factors that prevent students from raising their conflicts with advisors. There is no wishing away the unequal power relations in the relationship, and one can only hope that students utilize confidential and trustworthy channels to air their concerns. Students and faculty should jointly foster a culture where it's normal to raise differences of opinion and conflicts. As we noted last time, student organizations and students building academic relationships with non-committee members (with whom they can confide and could be great resources to navigate conflicts with faculty) have a significant role to play.

In examining the residency requirement in the Physical Sciences Division, we found that the residency requirement for PhD students is a gray area. The exact import of this requirement seems elusive and is often defined by academic units as and when they are called upon to do so. The Student Manual curiously does not mention the terms of this requirement, but only that of full-time registration. However, it cannot follow that all full-time registered students, *ipso facto*, have to be in residence. Nor does it follow how might residence be defined. With many students away from the university during the pandemic, this question attained increasing importance in some units. We think that each academic unit/division should provide greater clarity to the residency requirement, and students should be told of the fine details of the requirement so that they are not caught off guard.

### 3. *Student employment*

While we saw cases from non-student employees alleging unfair labor practices, we only note here a problem that pertains to student employees. An increasing number of jobs, especially in writing programs, are becoming available to students. More often, they have the option of retaining the job after their student status gets over. This raises a peculiar problem: that is, precarity. The original condition of employment for these students was tied to their student status, and they continue to be beholden to those conditions even after they cease to be students. This often means that these

former student-employees neither have the full benefits of a student nor an employee and are sometimes subject to unfair work conditions. It would be beneficial for both parties to be fully aware of the work conditions before committing to employment. Our office has no role to play in resolving these conflicts except to highlight the fact that we have seen such cases and ask that the relevant authorities look into possible amends to rectify the anomalies in the work conditions of these former-student employees.

In sum, as the university gets larger in terms of its organizational structure and as we attract a more competitive pool of students, the trends we see in 2022 might be a sign of future trends. We will surely see the trend of academic cases dominating our case log just as we are sure that college students will remain our largest clientele. Aside from the grievance officer for graduate students, this year, we also saw the creation of the Office of Student Advocates for the college students. This student-run office (housed under the Student Government) helps students navigate various processes and procedures, including disciplinary processes. We have and will be working in cooperation with these offices in the coming years.

Yet, the Student Ombuds Office remains the most important place for every student in the university to raise a question or concern pertaining to any aspect of their student life, in class or off class, on-campus or off-campus. Our remit remains broader in scope than any other office on campus, and we are committed to looking into any issues that relate to questions of fairness, equity, and justice. We guarantee complete confidentiality to our clients (even when we must pursue a case or talk to a third party). Our office is interested in seeing problems resolved rather than being tamed or delayed. To that end, we believe in a more interventionist agenda, intervening in problems to find solutions rather than watching from the gallery. We are grateful for the cooperation of our campus partners and to all the officials, faculty, and staff we had to reach out to resolve conflicts in the last six months. Thank you all for helping us complete another year in the Ombuds office.

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