

Annual Report of the Student Ombuds Office AY2022-2023

The Student Ombuds Office was originally established in 1968 as a resource for students seeking confidential, informal, and unbiased advice as they navigated campus life. Since 1968, the principal mission of the office has not changed. We exist to provide students a space to discuss issues and receive advice in confidence.

During the AY 2022-2023, the Student Ombuds Office fielded a total of 82 cases. This figure was on par with AY 2021-2022, during which we fielded 78 requests. Notably the past two years have been some of the office's busiest, which we attribute to the rebranding campaign started approximately two years ago that involved the renaming of the office, development of a logo, and production of outreach materials to promote our services more widely throughout campus with a focus on graduate and professional students.

Of the 82 cases, 49 were from undergraduates from the College and 22 were PhD, Masters, or professional students. The remaining people were either not students or declined to provide their affiliation. Our office truly sees the breadth of student issues and concerns. In this annual letter, we have chosen to focus on several topics that we encountered frequently over this past year.

Increased use of office by graduate students

In the past two years, our office has made a conscious effort to advertise our services to graduate students on campus. The graduate student–advisor relationship tends to be a complex professional relationship to navigate, and we have found that our office has been a valuable option for students experiencing interpersonal concerns with their advisors. Although students approach us with many types of issues, two perennial issues are expectation setting and unprofessional conduct. We have found that many issues, whether it be authorship conflicts or pressure to answer emails after hours, stem from the two parties not setting expectations around work. To this end, we encourage students to have these conversations proactively with their advisors, and students can use our office to practice such conversations.

The other common issue is unprofessional conduct. Many graduate students are students who have not held jobs outside of academia, nor have many of their advisors. Because of this, we have found that training in professional conduct has been lacking in some settings. For example, yelling and belittling a student would be certainly considered unprofessional and abusive behavior in most settings, but students who have never worked outside academia may not be able to recognize this behavior as unacceptable. Conversely, some advisors unfortunately may not realize that they are engaging in behavior that is problematic. For this issue, we advise the university to provide programming on professional conduct for both students and advisors.

Student issues with medical billing & insurance

Many students approached our office this year with issues of surprise billing, inconsistent or conflicting billing information, and billing errors from health services or the hospital. Although this does not fall squarely within the purview of the Ombuds Office, the high number of cases this past year is concerning. Students are often at their most vulnerable when seeking medical help, and students face an asymmetry of power and information in the healthcare system. Neither UChicago nor this office can fix the US healthcare system, but we do want to flag this issue as an area of concern. Health services should strive for greater transparency, predictability, and prompt

communication when it comes to billing, and we encourage administration to stress these values to decision-makers in healthcare on campus.

What perhaps does fall more within the purview of our office is the ability of the university to help students during these acute emergencies. Many students who approached our office were pointed to the university emergency fund as a resource to get short-term, interest-free loans or grants specifically for medical or personal emergencies. While many students were able to find the help they needed in part or whole, many students still voiced concern that this process lacked transparency.

Grade appeals

We start this section by noting that our office has little purview over grading, as the University of Chicago gives professors almost full providence over student grades. If a conflict exists, students should first address the issue with the instructor and/or course assistants. Using our office to try to pressure professors to change grades is an inappropriate use of our resources, and we unfortunately have to turn down many students who come to our office for this purpose. That being said, we have noticed that some scenarios seem to set the student up for success better than others.

We encourage students to address any issues with grading as quickly as possible, ideally before the end of a quarter. We have found that students are reasonably and predictably busy during finals and often defer addressing grade and academic issues until the quarter is over. This, however, is inadvisable, as grades are notoriously difficult to change once submitted to the registrar. A more successful strategy is to prioritize bringing issues up with the course instructor even during a busy time such as exam period, as waiting results in students having to spend even more time in the following quarter, usually with less favorable results.

Conflicts regarding course policies and syllabi

Many of the grade appeals did not stem from the grade itself but from a lack of transparency of how student grades are calculated. Expectations should be set between the professor and the students at the beginning of the term, and professors should stick to this plan and update the class in writing if unforeseen circumstances require a change to the grading scheme. While we do encourage students to be proactive about making sure they understand the expectations for a class, we believe that the instructor has the responsibility to generate a course syllabus that outlines how grades will be calculated, major exam and assignment deadlines, and an absence policy. We strongly encourage instructors to have an absence and make-up policy, as this tends to be a frequent point of contention.

Academic suspension policies

Each year we get several inquiries about students who are placed on academic suspension. In particular, we receive questions about their conditions for return. We have found that the general student sentiment is that the academic suspension policy at the university is rather draconian, as most students will have to take a minimum four-quarter leave if suspended for academic reasons. This policy is on par with that of many other colleges and universities, so our office is hesitant to recommend that this period be shortened. Rather, we believe that it would be more effective for advisors, administrators, and students to have a more focused conversation on how academic suspensions are meant to be educational, not punitive experiences. No students wish to leave the university, but in many cases students find themselves in positions where they are not able to

meaningfully participate in their studies at the university, and we believe that it would be helpful to have conversations about how to develop skills to return and succeed rather than focusing on the suspension itself.

Ombuds resources for non-students

A trend that we have noticed in the past few years is that our office is approached by individuals looking for ombuds resources, but they do not have an office set up to assist them. These individuals tend to be those whose positions do not squarely line up with the student–faculty dichotomy at the university, such as post-docs, visiting scientists, or medical residents. While our office has limited resources in working with non-students, we have tried to take on these cases as appropriate because these individuals often have few other resources. The recent change for UChicago Grad to include postdoctoral services has begun to address this issue, but many postdocs are not aware of the resources available to them. Similar issues exist in UChicago Medicine, where individuals are deeply tied to the academic institution of UChicago while not technically being affiliated with the university itself.

Academic Dishonesty

Every year we get several cases around the issue of academic dishonesty. Whether they are reporting cheating, witnessing cheating, or committing academic dishonesty, students affected by academic dishonesty in all its forms have approached our office. We would like to emphasize that our office serves as a confidential resource for those who are considering reporting, as we have no obligation to notify the university, although we will of course encourage and support any student who does want to file a report. We will also mention here that many students who have committed academic dishonesty reach out to our office to help them manage how to disclose their actions to their professors or navigate the disciplinary process. We remind the readers here that our office is able to help students in any of the above scenarios.



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