

## **Student Ombuds Services 2021-22 Annual Report**

Submitted by Mike Giancola  
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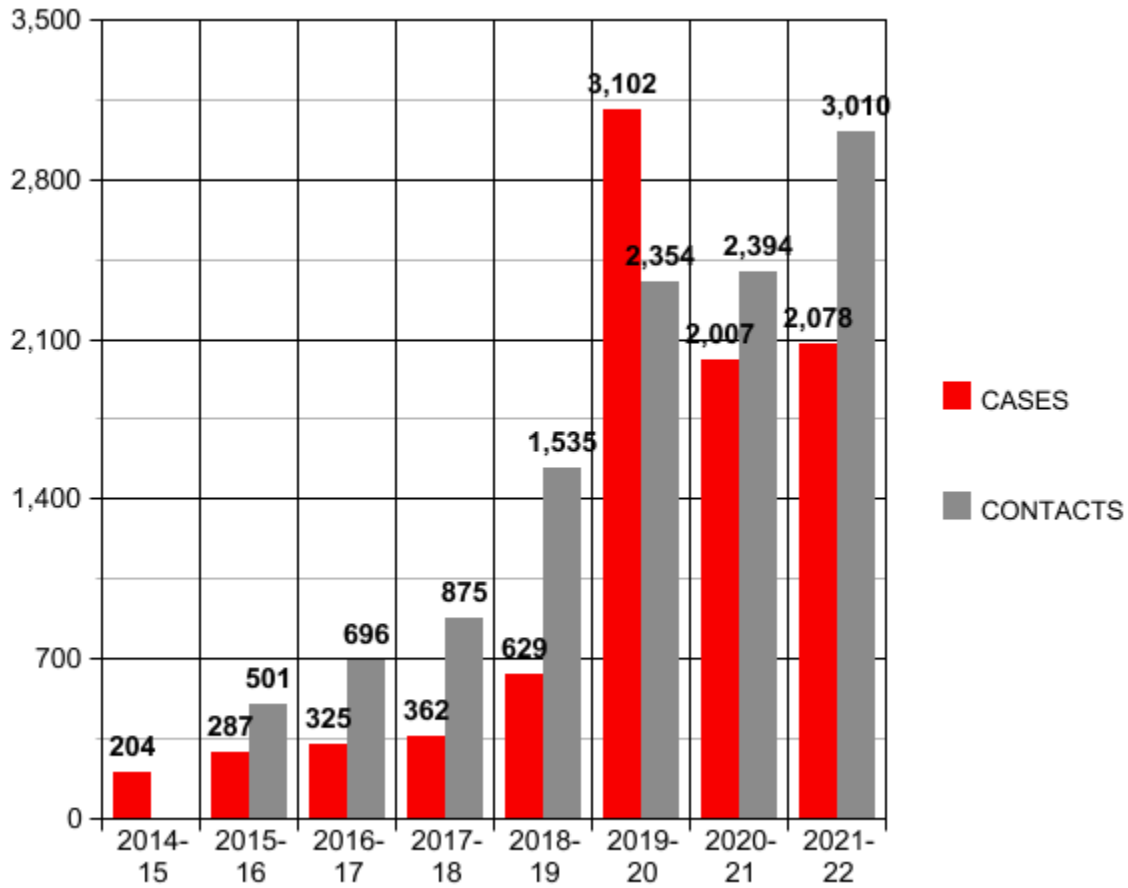
- Demand for Student Ombuds Services/Pack Essentials continues to increase. 2078 cases were handled by Student Ombuds Services during the 2021-22 academic year, resulting in 3010 total contacts. This represents a 4% increase in cases and a 26% increase in contacts as compared to 2020-21, and a 230% increase in cases over the 2018-2019 academic year (pre-covid numbers).
- Student Ombuds Services program review was completed in spring 2021. Key recommendations and an update on the course of action include:
  - Evaluate Dual Role and Office Structure (Student Ombuds and Pack Essentials) - This has been a topic of discussion with the Dean and Vice Chancellor. Further study is needed before acting on this recommendation. Having more data on what post-COVID caseloads will look like as well as assessing how the GA position fits into the future direction of the office will be helpful.
  - Develop appropriate infrastructure to support Pack Essentials to be sustainable long term - The vision for the Pack Essentials Hub will move us in the direction of a sustainable infrastructure. The university needs to address the staffing structure to ensure sustainability.
  - Create a working group to examine university priorities surrounding ombuds services for all stakeholders – The working group was created with campus stakeholders and developed a vision for the future of ombuds services at the university that included having a unified ombuds office. The administration ultimately decided to maintain the current structure for ombuds services, mainly a student ombud and then contracting for faculty/staff ombud services.
- Mike Giancola passed the ombuds certification exam, the first step in becoming certified as a Certified Organizational Ombudsman Practitioner (CO-OP)
- Vickie Youngblood was nominated for the Award for Excellence.

### **Financial Ombuds – Pack Essentials**

- Served as an active member on the Pack Essentials steering committee and helped lead the campus efforts to support students experiencing food, housing and/or financial insecurity.
- The Student Ombuds continues to serve as the first point of contact for students experiencing food, housing and/or financial insecurity.

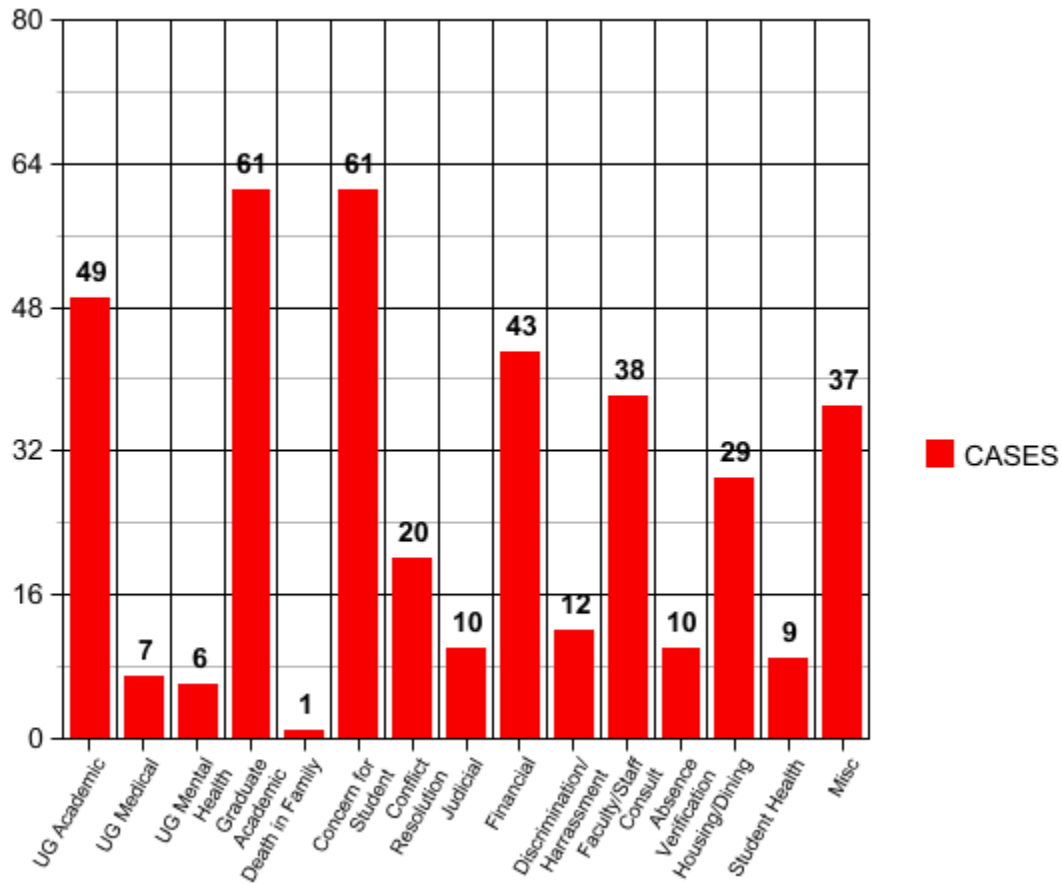
- 1686 Pack Essentials applications were submitted in 2021-22
  - 706 grants were provided from the Student Emergency Fund totaling \$303,633
  - 17 meal scholarships were provided totaling \$30,387
  - 3435 meal share meals were provided for students to eat in the dining halls
- Students continued to experience higher rates of food and housing insecurity due to COVID. From March 2020 through May 2022:
    - 5847 Pack Essentials applications received from March 2020-May 2022
    - 3582 grants provided from the Student Emergency Fund totaling \$1,557,667
- Significant funds raised in support of Pack Essentials resources in partnership with DASA Development and other campus development offices:
    - Approximately \$1,361,000 was raised in support of the Student Emergency Fund and Endowment, Meal and Housing Scholarships and Feed the Pack Pantry, during the 2021-22 academic year (of which \$756,000 was for the SEF endowment).
- Emilia Cordero Ocegüera (.5 FTE graduate student) was hired to assist with the Pack Essentials initiative, and primarily assisted with developing a preventative strategy for resource allocation as well as helping to respond to submitted Pack Essentials applications. Funding for the position was provided by Student Government and the Graduate Student Association over three years through the 2023-24 year.
- Participated on a work team to clarify and identify resources for student-parents. Provided interested students the information to create a student-parent student organization.
- Worked with Office of International Services & Global Engagement to support international students impacted by COVID-19 and helped identify international students in need to nominate for various outside funding opportunities.
- Consulted with Office of International Scholars and the Community College Collaboration (C3) on their respective student emergency funds and applicable processes to match those used by the Pack Essentials emergency fund.

## Student Ombuds Cases (since inception)



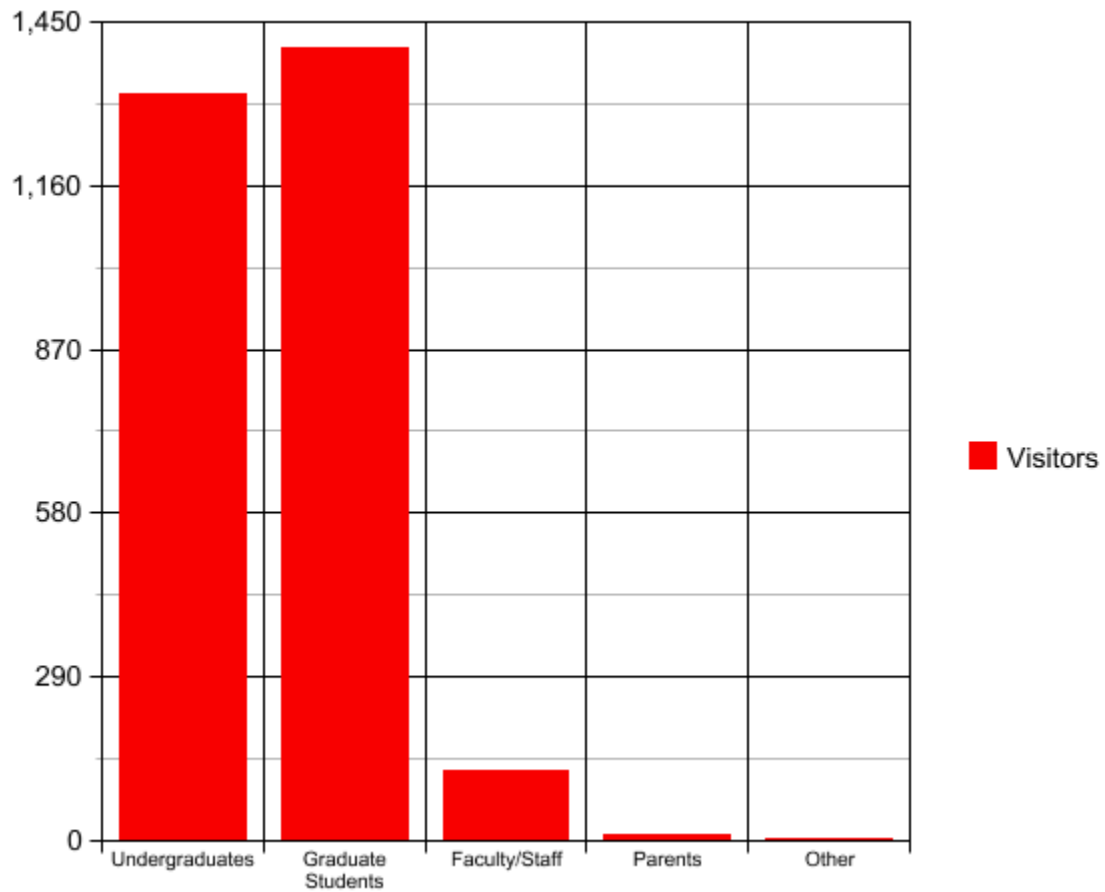
- 4% increase in cases and a 26% increase in contacts as compared to 2020-21.
  - Note: Each visitor to the office constitutes a unique case (If multiple students are involved in the same situation, collectively they are recorded as one case). A contact refers to each interaction with a visitor and any contacts made to a campus entity.

## Types of Cases



- NOTE: Graph does not include Pack Essentials applications.
- General Academic concerns include grade disputes, concerns regarding treatment by professors and related academic policies.
- UG Academic (medical) often involved requests for assistance after some traumatic medical incident (car accident, difficult diagnosis, etc.)
- UG Academic (mental health) often involved requests for assistance during or after psychological distress (stress, hospitalization, etc.) and often times involved parents.
- Graduate Academic concerns include relationship issues with advisor/PI, disputes over intellectual property with PIs, and other general academic issues.
- Most judicial cases involved students wanting to understand their rights within the judicial process, specifically after an academic integrity charge.
- Most absence verification cases were handled by the AV Officer. Cases handled by the Ombud typically involved more complicated cases that required additional follow-up.
- There were increases in graduate academic cases, concern for students, and faculty/staff consultations on student issues as compared to 2020-21.

## Visitor Status



- Graduate students utilizing Student Ombuds continues to rise, representing 49% of all visitors as compared to 39% of all visitors in 2020-21. Much of this increase came from master's level students applying for Pack Essentials support.
- Most contacts from faculty/staff were to consult on a student related issue or share a concern about a student.

## **Selected Cases & Recommendations**

Recommendations are shared with units, departments, colleges, and administrators on an ongoing basis. *(Note: This is a partial list and efforts have been made to maintain confidentiality for the visitor. More specific issues and concerns are shared with the appropriate administrators per the Student Ombuds' charter).*

- Assisted on several cases where graduate students had not received their benefits per their contracts.
- Assisted student concerned about lack of childcare subsidy for graduate students - connected with HR and advised expansion of language on website about eligibility to make clear that graduate students are not eligible for childcare subsidy provided to faculty and staff.
- Conducted listening sessions with undergraduate students at the request of a scholarship program's staff to respond to students' concerns about DEI issues within the community.
- Surfaced concerns from multiple students who had difficulty reaching faculty to make up work after being given an incomplete in a previous semester. Contributed to a best practices document for students and faculty.
- Provided mediation support for several cases where students were having a contract/roommate dispute. Increased number of cases this year dealt with financial conflicts in which students left their apartments without taking responsibility for their financial obligations.
- Helped surface student concern that staff member was allegedly using racist, sexist, and homophobic language in the workplace.
- Surfaced concern about change in UH policy requiring ES King and Western Manor residents to pay for housing for the semester in advance. Facilitated a townhall with students and administrators to address concerns and explore options.
- Facilitated discussions between graduate student and PI to help open the lines of communication and address concerns.
- Continue to connect with CARES team and Office of Institutional Equity and Diversity on an increasing number of cases.
- Provided anonymous feedback from several graduate students who alleged sexual harassment by a faculty member.
- Increasingly provided leadership coaching to faculty, staff and administration on student life and personnel issues.
- Assisted with facilitation between faculty and college administration to help address issues of concern.

- Met with Office of Student Conduct, Division of Academic and Student Affairs and Graduate School to share feedback and discuss student trends.
- Shared concerns with appropriate campus leaders about financial stress many students are experiencing including graduate student stipends, significant increases in off-campus rent, and impact of inflation on students' overall food, housing, and financial security.

### **Student Ombuds Assessment:**

- Based on a survey of visitors to Student Ombuds Services:
  - 95% indicated that scheduling was easy and convenient
  - 93% reported being able to meet in a timely manner
  - 94% said Ombuds was courteous and respectful
  - 93% indicated Ombuds was objective throughout interactions
  - 92% reported Ombuds was knowledgeable of institutional policies and procedures.
  - 94% trust Ombuds to maintain confidentiality
  - 90% indicated Ombuds helped identify and evaluate options
  - 92% would refer others to Student Ombuds Services
  - Selected comments from the survey included:
    - My issue was resolved in a timely manner and Student Ombuds took care of everything for me. Mike Giancola was kind and friendly.
    - Very knowledgeable, friendly, and helpful.
    - Response to my requested services was quick but ombuds doesn't have enough resources to support graduate students.
    - Excellent experience - we were experiencing a prolonged conflict in our unit and the ombuds helped us identify roots behind the issues we had been grappling with for several months.
    - My experience with Student Ombuds services is exclusively positive and I would recommend it to other students in need.
    - Outstanding, very knowledgeable, very helpful and understanding, sought quick resolutions.
    - I've been very pleased with their professionalism, responsiveness, and willingness to help. I'm also very impressed with their ability to help educate and inform of services offered. I also appreciate their ability to break down barriers between students and asking for help.

- I met with student ombuds to address a conflict with another grad student that ultimately resulted in a mediated conversation for us to both address our perspectives and overcome previous conflicts.
- Thank you for this fantastic work. This is one of the reasons NCSU is a great place to be.
- I have referred students with very difficult issues to Student Ombuds, and they helped students wonderfully.
- Fair, impartial, and confidential to the max. Thanks

### **Pack Essentials Assessment:**

- Based on a survey of students who completed a Pack Essentials application:
  - 91% indicated Ombuds followed up within 24 hours
  - 93% felt concerns were listened to and treated with respect
  - 92% felt comfortable talking to the Ombuds
  - 95% felt Ombuds was knowledgeable about campus and community resources
  - 90% felt Ombuds provided options and appropriate resources
  - 86% felt support was helpful and allowed them to focus on their success
  - 89% said it was important to them that Ombuds was a confidential resource
- Selected comments from the survey included:
  - When I talked with Mike, he was always courteous, calm, and nice. He listened to my issue and quickly helped me get registered and funds to live so I could start the spring semester with some ease. If it wasn't for his assistance, I would not have been registered this semester at all. THANK YOU SO MUCH!
  - They were able to help me quickly and allowed me to focus on academics by working with me to mitigate financial stressors.
  - I mostly wish Ombuds was more advertised/I was aware of it sooner.
  - Pack Essentials is a vital program at NC State, and I am extremely proud to work at a university that offers this.
  - There are a lot of resources available on campus, but nothing for distance students who do not live near Raleigh.
  - I am incredibly impressed with the Pack Essentials resources - from their availability to the website interface, to the personal interactions with the ombuds...it is a fantastic operation that clearly is working in the best interest of supporting students so they can remain focused on achieving their academic goals.



- Mike was responsive, helpful, and down to earth. I never felt uncomfortable telling him my situation and am forever grateful.
- Pack Essentials was really helpful to me during tough times. My concerns were noted, and proper actions were taken, which was such a great thing for international students like us.
- The website is very clear and provides all options, and the person I spoke to was very kind and helpful.
- Very professional yet compassionate. If it wasn't for Mike, I would have been living on the streets.

### **Recommendations and concerns for the future**

- As a follow up to the Student Ombuds Program review conducted in Spring 2021, the Ombuds convened a working group to consider the future of Ombuds services at NC State. The working group included representatives from constituent groups including Faculty Senate, Staff Senate, Student Government, the Graduate School, the Graduate Student Association, the Office for Faculty Excellence and University HR. A vision for the future of ombuds services at the university was created that included having a unified ombuds office to support independent, confidential, informal, and impartial ombuds services. The proposed vision would have unified the existing Student Ombuds Services with the Faculty and Staff Ombuds to ensure the highest level of service to the campus community. An added benefit to having a unified office was the continuity of service when one ombuds is out of the office and in the current case, when an ombuds decides to leave the institution (faculty/staff ombuds retiring in June 2022). The administration ultimately decided to maintain the current structure for ombuds services, mainly a student ombud and then contracting for faculty/staff ombuds. While the current model is working effectively, it doesn't address the continuity of service addressed in the report and mentioned above.
- Demand for Pack Essentials resources has continued to increase, with 1686 Pack Essentials applications being submitted in 2021-22. While we have seen an increase in need every year since Pack Essentials inception in 2017, COVID and now inflation have had dramatic impacts on students' food/housing/financial security. A significant number of these applications have come from international master's level students from the College of Engineering (43%). We have continued to partner with OIS and other campus departments to ensure that students have the resources to successfully complete their degrees, while at the same time, reinforcing the

purpose of the Pack Essentials resources as an emergency resource. During COVID with the existence of federal grants, many students assumed that student emergency fund grants were intended to be provided each semester and to reduce debt load, putting a major strain on our available resources and staff. Efforts are underway to “reset” the expectations of the Pack Essentials resources and communicate with incoming students and campus partners.

Another major concern is the lack of availability of affordable housing on and around campus. With off campus rents rising over 20% last year along with the anticipated growth in engineering students, the need for more affordable housing is essential to our students' success. We are partnering with the HOST program (a local non-profit) to expand housing options for students through identifying families who will agree to host students in their homes. While this program is an innovative solution, the university must consider other robust housing options as well.

- The vision for the Pack Essentials “HUB” will help us better meet the needs of students experiencing food, housing and/or financial insecurity. The vision includes the relocation of the Feed the Pack food pantry to North Hall along with expanded services to serve as a physical space and a one-stop resource for students. The plan is for construction to occur during the fall 2022 semester with a grand opening planned for spring 2023. In order to realize this vision, we need to finalize a sustainable staffing structure for the Pack Essentials HUB inclusive of making the HUB coordinator position a permanent position and related student leadership positions. Preliminary discussions with DASA Development have begun to leverage private support and further position NC State as a national leader in basic needs support for students.