

Brandeis University Ombuds

Supporting an ethical and civil culture encouraging mutual understanding and resolution through respectful dialogue and fair practices.

Fall Semester Report: August - December 2023

Executive Summary

The purpose of this report is to provide a data-supported summary about: the Brandeis University Ombuds Office's services provided; trends observed in our work throughout the University this past Fall 2023 semester; trends observed in visitor support services and visitor experiences; Office success indicators; and recommendations for overcoming some of the identified trends. This report includes data from Fall Semester 2023, Summer Session 2023 (June-July), Spring Semester 2023 (January-May), Fall Semester 2022 (August-December), Summer Session 2022 (June-July), and Spring Semester 2022 (January-May).

Office staff facilitated a number of educational workshops and took part in orientation outreach events. In total, the Office reached 579 participants through outreach and marketing meetings. 140 individuals attended workshops offered by the Ombuds Team. 132 individuals participated in facilitated dialogues (including team retreats, group norms and guiding principles sessions, talking/listening circles, multi-participant conversations facilitated by ombuds). Post-meeting participant satisfaction survey results indicated a majority of participants were satisfied with the support they received from the Ombuds team. In addition, 110 visitors came to the Office for visitor meetings in Fall 2023, including: 39 students; 50 staff; 12 faculty; and 9 individuals external to the university. Analysis of visitor experiences uncovered themes including: (1) challenges with personal health and safety, (2) staff and faculty challenges in dealing with difficult communications stemming from employment and interpersonal issues, (3) staff concerns about workplace conflict and performance reviews, and (4) graduate student concerns about research and academic policy issues.

This past semester the Ombuds team was engaged in the creation of talking/listening circles involving more than 60 people in 6 different circles where individuals shared and listened to others' stories about their experiences and impacts surrounding life issues and stresses in the world. The Ombuds team also had a number of visitors with acute and critical/trauma based concerns that are arising on campus surrounding political and world strife. The team offered a number of orientation sessions as well as offered workshops on the following topics: guiding principles, difficult conversations, attentive listening, giving and receiving feedback, and marketing the Ombuds office.

Ombuds Office reports are posted on the [Ombuds Office website](#). Our current practice is to report at the end of every semester and one annual summary report that is published in the fall of each year.

Quick Links to Trends, Highlights, Anomalies, & Considerations

- [Total Visits](#)
- [Total Visitors](#)
- [Time Spent with Visitors](#)
- [Percentage of Number of Sessions with Visitors](#)
- [Mix of Time Spent](#)
- [Mix of Visitor Populations](#)
- [Primary Issues](#)

Current Ombuds Office Team

The Ombuds Office is a campus resource that serves as an outlet to process any type of challenging situation, a bridge to navigate campus resources, and a coach to help, support, and empower community members, offices, and teams. We like to think of it as a place to go when you don't know where to go!

The Ombuds team is available to all students, faculty, staff, alumni, and anyone who has a situation, related issue, or conflict involving Brandeis University or anyone having an affiliation with Brandeis. The Ombuds team this past semester included [Don Greenstein](#), [Esther Lin](#), and [Kylie Millbern](#). Mike Rozinsky transitioned from the team at the close of the Spring 2023 semester. We appreciate his service to the Brandeis community and stewardship of the program as part of the Ombuds Office team from February 2020 through June 2023. Kylie Millbern joined the team in September 2023. She comes to us with a depth of experience as a mediator with The Mediation Group (TMG), in Brookline, MA. She graduated from UMass, Boston with a Masters in Conflict Resolution. She helps to diversify the team by bringing a background in group interventions and training.

Visit our [website](#) to learn more about our [standards of practice](#) of confidentiality, impartiality, informality, and independence in the [Policy Statement](#) on the Brandeis Ombuds Office. The Ombuds are not mandatory reporters, nor an office of notice for Brandeis University. The Ombuds Office is a place to consider when you have experienced something, and you want an informal space to explore your options before you potentially involve others or commence a formal process.

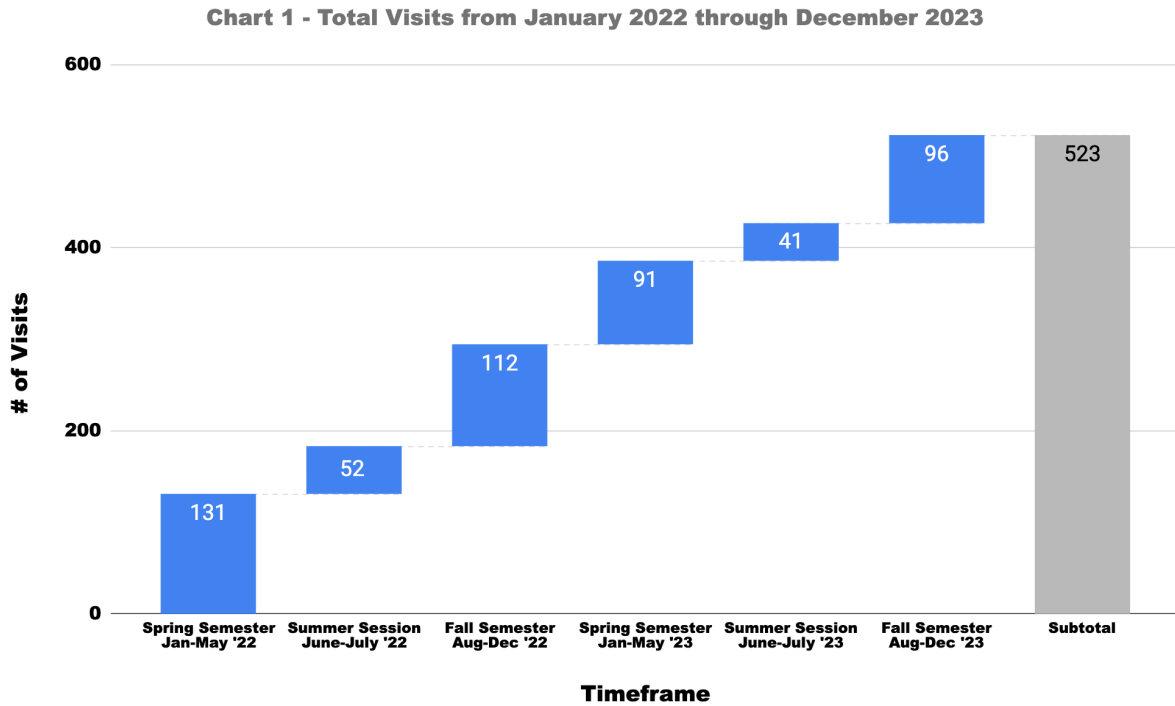
Contact Us

For information on how to schedule appointments, ways we work with visitors, and access our online resources, visit our [website](#) or call the confidential Ombuds Office phone line at 781.736.2265. We are available to meet with visitors remotely by phone, Zoom, or in person at a time that works best for the individual. At this time please schedule an appointment by emailing brandeisombuds@brandeis.edu to meet with an Ombuds. You may request a specific individual or one will be assigned to contact you. Visiting the Ombuds Office is always voluntary, and each visitor may choose which Ombuds with whom they would like to meet.

Defining “Trends”

“Trends” are informed by our data and the topics and issues raised voluntarily by visitors during visits which we believe signals the need and/or presents an opportunity for intervention or action by campus leadership and the Brandeis community. Individual issues become “trends” when we recognize that multiple visitors from one or more offices, departments, or schools throughout the University community are visiting us with the same problem/topic/concern. We also may choose to raise awareness about a significant issue that may not be a trend and appears to be a major concern that needs to be promptly addressed.

Trends, Highlights, Anomalies, & Considerations



The total number of visits to the Ombuds Office from January 1, 2023 through December 31, 2023, was 228. The number of visits during this time period has decreased from the prior calendar year, and we find there are ebbs and flows in these numbers over time. This semester the types of issues visitors raised were on the whole more acute and often involved mental health concerns or trauma of some kind. In response, we devoted significant time and energy to larger-group efforts, including talking/listening circles, facilitated conversations, and workshops.

This past semester we had a new Ombuds being mentored, and we were not as able to promptly meet with visitors, which may have deterred some visitors who had time-sensitive concerns that one full-time (with a new mentee Ombuds) and one-part time ombuds could not timely meet.

[See a tabular view of Chart 1](#)

Chart 2 - Total Visitors from January 2022 through December 2023

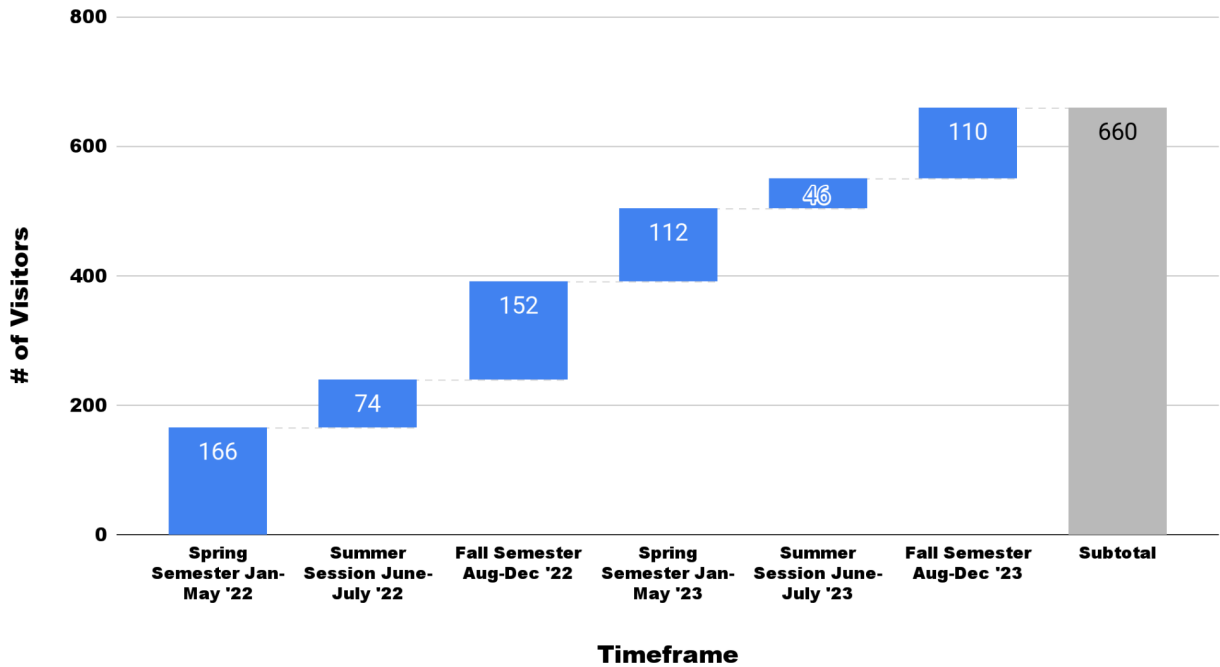
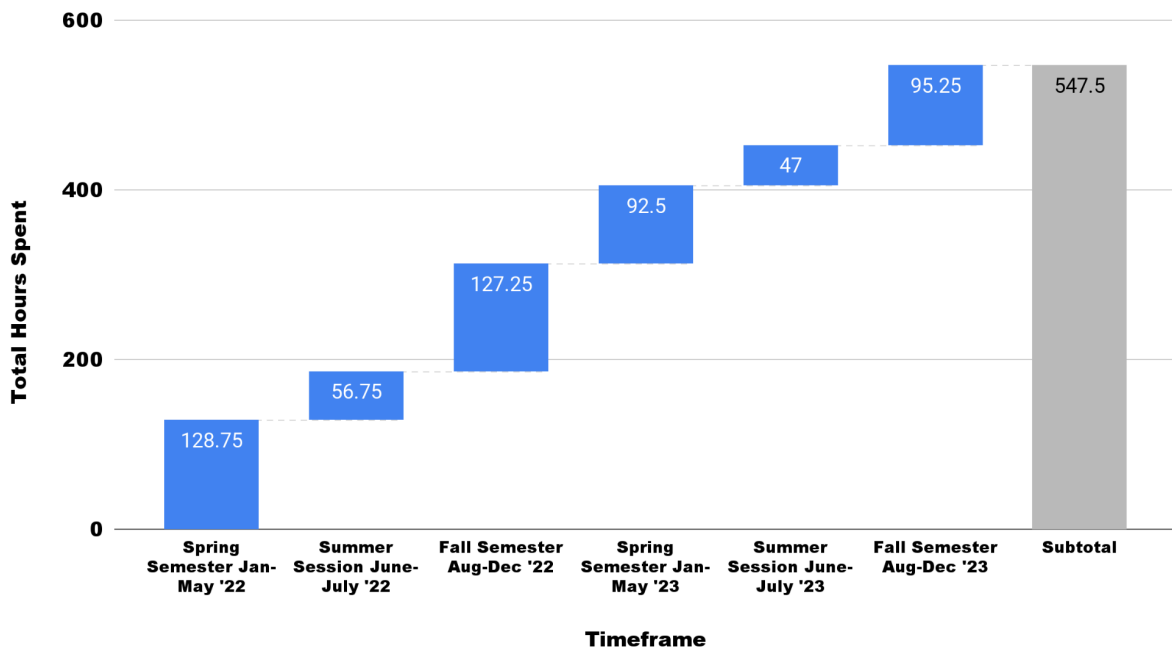


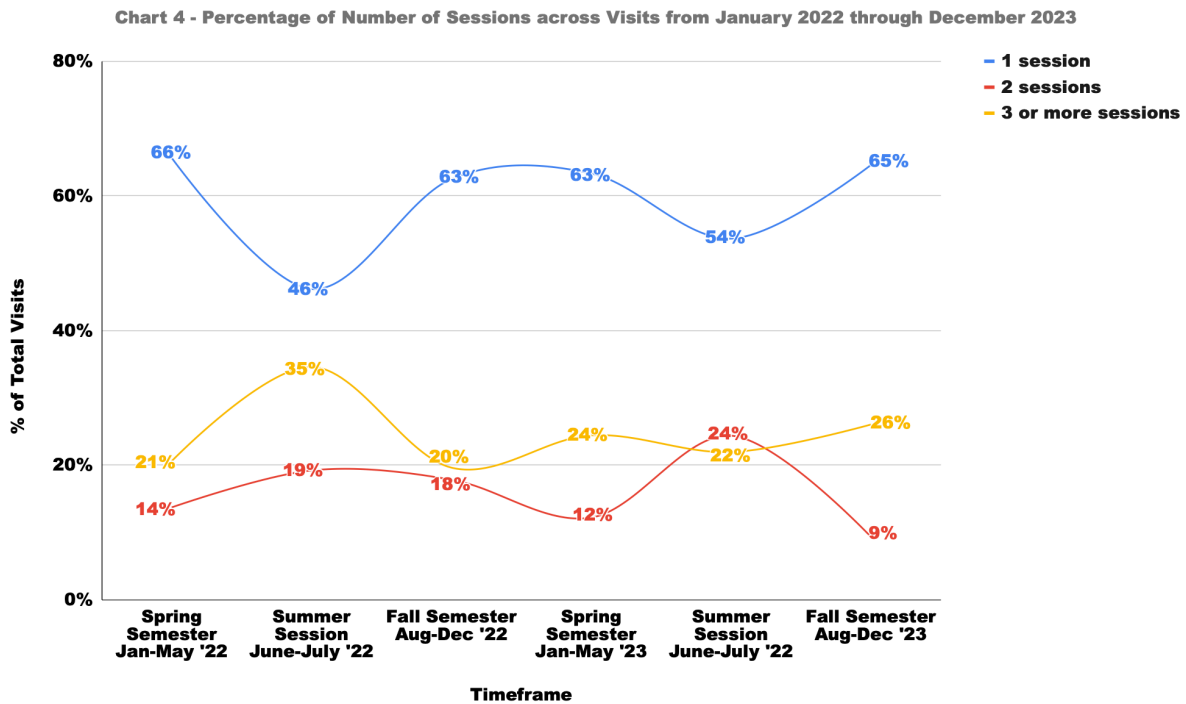
Chart 2 shows the total number of visitors who met with an Ombuds. There are more visitors than visits in each semester ([Chart 1](#)), as an Ombuds may meet with multiple visitors for a facilitated dialogue and other kinds of group work furthering the conflict management capability across the community. [See a tabular view of Chart 2](#)

Chart 3 - Time Spent with Visitors from January 2022 through December 2023



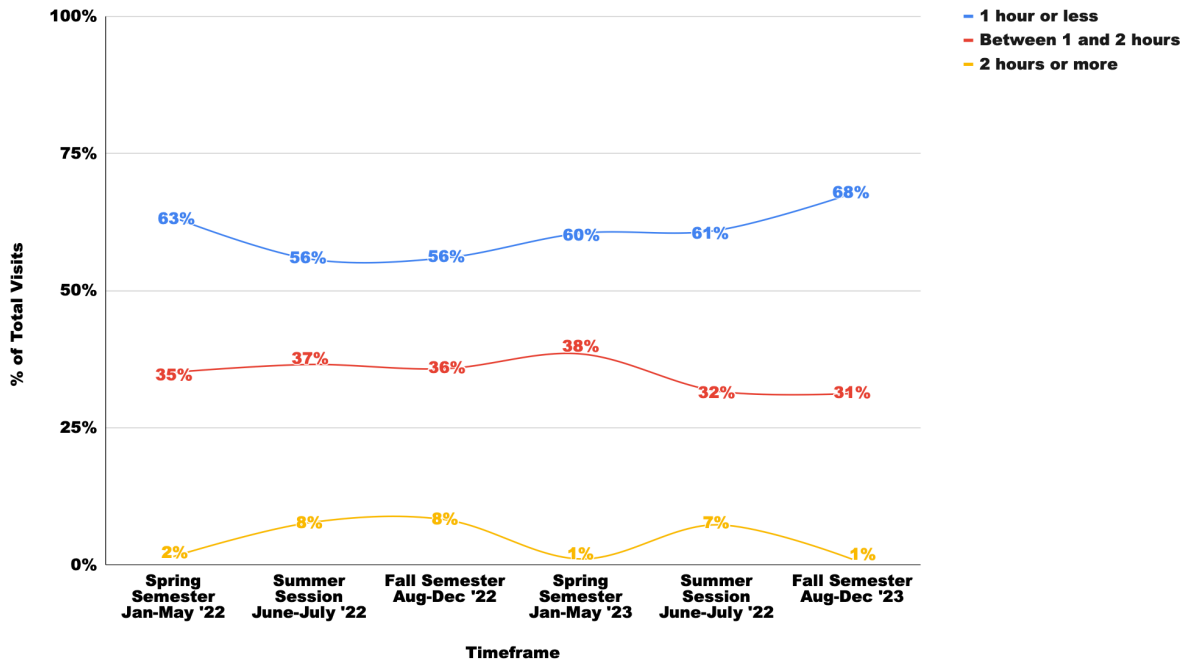
The time included in Chart 3 reflects only the time spent with visitors helping and supporting their ongoing concerns and issues, as well as identifying resources and individual priorities and goals during visitor meetings. It is not inclusive of time spent by the Ombuds coordinating a visit,

reviewing policy, and/or exploring possible options independently from the visitor(s). Time spent conducting educational workshops and informational/marketing sessions or meeting with various leaders and committees across campus to learn about ongoing needs **is in addition to the time reflected in this chart.** [See tabular view of Chart 3](#)



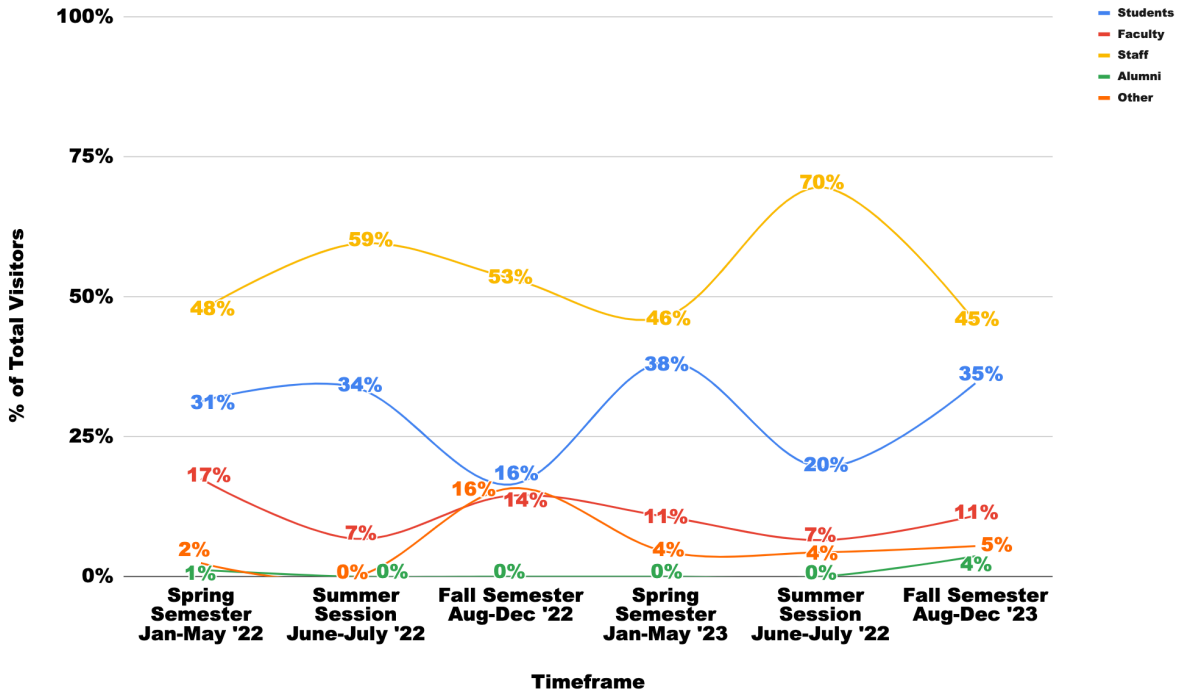
It is apparent that most visitors come for a single visit (65%), which stayed constant over the past year, took a dip this summer and then increased again this fall. Visitors who came for two sessions dropped from 24% to 9% this past semester, and three or more visits has increased from 22% to 26%. The increase in three or more visits is possibly related to the change in meetings from Zoom to in person, and/or related to the desire to work through the heavy level of stress that seems to be rampant at all levels of our campus community. [See tabular view of Chart 4](#)

Chart 5 - Percentage of Mix of Time Spent across Visits from January 2022 through December 2023



It is clear that most visitors meet with an Ombuds for 1 hour or shorter. Visits of this duration remained constant this past semester increasing slightly from 61% up to 68%. Visitors spending between 1-2 hours decreased (32% to 31%), and those spending 2 hours or more decreased from 7% to 1%. The changes in time spent with visitors is solely dependent on the needs of the visitor. We design our initial meetings to last no more than 90 minutes, and since this is a voluntary meeting, the visitors generally control how long they choose to spend in a meeting with the Ombuds. [See tabular view of Chart 5](#)

Chart 6 - Percentage of Visitor Populations from January 2022 through December 2023



This past semester, Staff visitors have stayed pretty constant (46% to 45%) while Student visitors decreased by 3% (38% to 35%). The percentage of Faculty visitors stayed constant at 11%. Alumni have stayed very low, with few contacts this past semester. “Other” visitors stayed constant at 5%. “Other” reflects a non-Brandesian visitor (parent, landlord, community member with a Brandeis related concern, etc.). We continued to have a number of parental concerns this past semester (parents contacting the office with or without student involvement).

Topics raised by Staff and Faculty visitors range from policy concerns, adherence to policy, lack of understanding of mandatory reporting requirements, discriminatory practices, communication issues, ineffective and inappropriate management styles and practices, civility, stress in the workplace, and performance appraisal concerns after a new workplace performance review system was instituted over the past year. Bullying and concern about retaliation also remain at a high level. Many individuals are unwilling to file a formal grievance for fear of retaliation, need for continued relationship with the perceived bully, or potential for loss of employment. There also has been a significant rise in concern about staff having to handle the work of individuals who have departed for long durations when no replacement or temporary staff are hired to replace the unfilled position. Some individuals have complained of having to handle additional work responsibilities beyond their job description, and not being compensated for completing work outside of their usual duties. Others have shared that more senior people are compensated for extra responsibilities while junior staff are overlooked and just expected to take on more work when an office colleague departs.

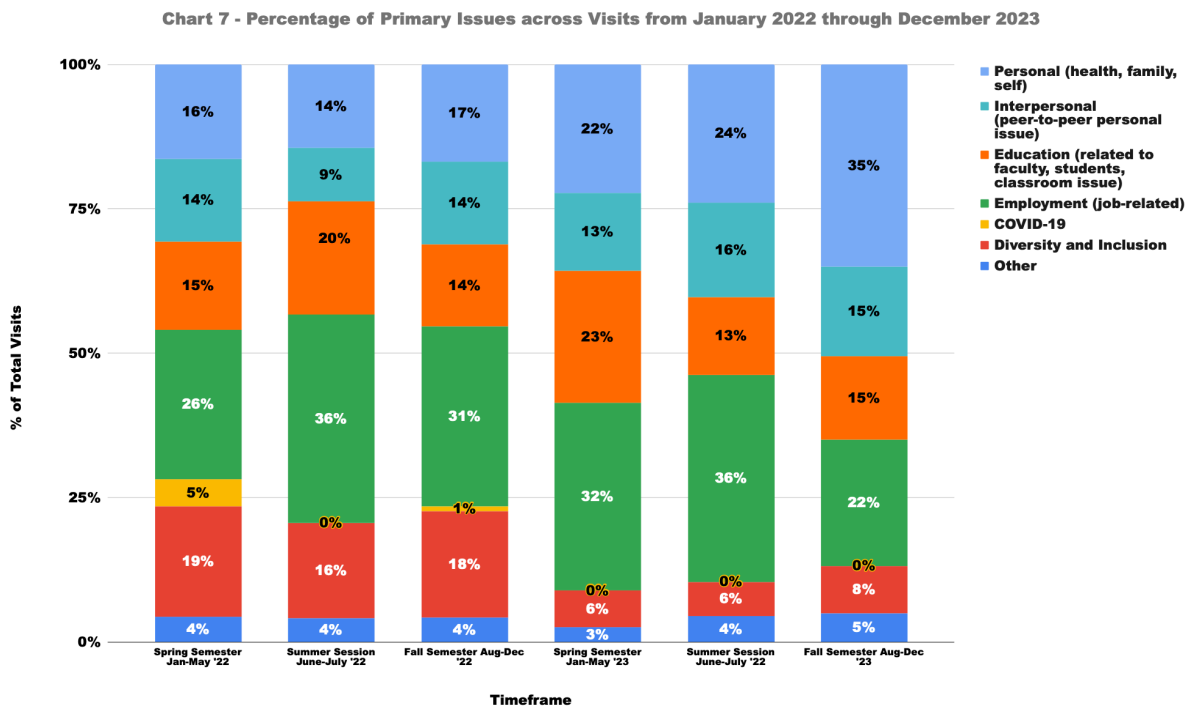
Topics raised by Student visitors include housing and roommate conflicts, health and accessibility issues, respect in the classroom and on campus, bullying, lack of civility, freedom of expression, antisemitism, Islamophobia, stress as well as traumatic reactions throughout the community.

Student visitors also raised concerns regarding formal processes including lack of due process, fairness, retaliation if any formal action is filed, and lack of timeliness in student conduct processes.

At a recent Ombuds retreat that Don attended, he heard from 17 other Ombuds from small liberal arts colleges that the issues presenting themselves to our office are very similar to most other higher education institutions. The high level of stress and difficult conversations, as well as harassment and bullying, are present and identified as issues coming to Ombuds offices.

These concerns have grown for visitors, and some people on campus have voluntarily departed or sought other positions within Brandeis to remove themselves from what they perceive as an unhealthy workplace environment. [See tabular view of Chart 6](#)

The primary issues as discussed in the above comments associated with Chart 6 are reflected in Chart 7 below.



There are issue categories to highlight:

- The personal concerns (health, family, and/or self), is the largest topic area coming through the office and is the primary issue that has seen the greatest increase over the past year (more than doubling from Fall 2022). It appears the impact of the war between Israel and Hamas has greatly impacted our community. The campus protest and arrests of students and a legal observer have brought visitors to our office concerned for their safety, worry of acts of antisemitism and islamophobia, and fear towards campus safety and police on campus.
- Employment concerns by staff and faculty are still very much front and center in our office. We regularly hear about concerns related to poor management styles, lack of respect or unfair treatment within teams and in interpersonal communications, lack of 1-1 meetings, no information shared prior to a performance review, people having to cover for others' departure, feeling as if they are handling significantly more work with little or no

recognition (and no increase in compensation) for the extra workload they are carrying above and beyond their usual job responsibilities.

- Diversity and Inclusion concerns slightly increased by 2% from 6-8% between the Spring and Fall 2023 semesters. Visitors described experiencing the impact of cultural differences, religious and freedom of speech concerns, microaggressions, lack of sensitivity in communications as well as poor interpersonal workplace relationships, disparate treatment on the basis of various identities, micro and macro aggressions, power dynamics, and the need for more education and continued concern for lack of BIPOC representation in University faculty and staff.
- Education/classroom concerns decreased by 8% this past year (23% in Fall '22 to 15% in Fall '23,) as students shared issues related to due process, accessibility and accommodation issues, grading policies, student conduct policy issues, and difficult communication concerns. Faculty and teaching assistants shared concerns about failure of students to follow policies, plagiarism, use of ChatGPT (artificial intelligence) in paper submissions, and cheating on exams.
- Interpersonal concerns increased by 2% over the past year. This may be related to increased in-person interactions and on campus protests, the increased/high stress levels and mental health concerns. The wars in the world and amount of publicity as well as increased political news have been raised in some of these concerns.
- "Other" reflects visitors with concerns relating to housing, landlord/tenant issues off-campus, policy and due process concerns, legal issues relating to international students, and parents with concerns about their child/student. [See tabular view of Chart 7](#)

Further to add to the summary above, the following themes and trends were shared by visitors. The Ombuds team identified these issues that campus leadership and community may want to consider and address:

- **New performance review system:** Many feel managers don't know how to give appropriate and timely feedback. Many managers don't feel employees are able to listen to the feedback offered. Training in this area on giving and receiving feedback would be appropriate. Managers are unclear about how to share interim information prior to a formal review so employees are not surprised by the written information shared in the mid year or end of year performance review. Human Resources has supported this with ongoing training and it appears many managers either don't take these workshops or fail to follow the guidance offered.
- **Cultural sensitivities** concerns in departments all over campus have been shared. There have been significant reports of complaints by staff, faculty, and students about individuals failing to comprehend cultural differences. Throughout the Brandeis community, there is a lack of sensitivity to the differences that exist within our international and spiritual communities. Microaggressions are present with many reports increasing since October 7, 2023. Visitors report experiencing aggressive behavior with inappropriate comments, degrading verbal micro-aggressions specifically related to culture, race and religious bias. Visitors report that some professors do not provide clearly stated classroom or lab research expectations and/or norms or guiding principles in their syllabus. Many visitors express a fear of retaliation with limited or no ability for self-advocacy. Students of marginalized identities, in particular, expressed feelings of being targeted or threatened by people in their classroom and/or work environment. Visitors are fearful of formal processes not being able

to help them resolve issues being raised, and the need for ongoing relationship with a professor in their future career endeavors.

- **Student conduct process** has been raised as a concern by visitors this past semester. Visitors feel that the process is slow and is not handled in the manner that is set out in the policy. There are concerns that people who attend to support a student cannot speak to the student during the process.
- A trend raised last semester continued into this semester: relating to **formal policy processes**. A number of students have visited the office sharing concerns about being required to appear in a duplicative formal process with little information shared with them about the complaints being addressed and the factual situations they are being accused of being engaged in that give rise to the process. It might be appropriate for someone to review the goals of all student processes for transparency and whether there is a need for duplicative processes. Is restorative justice ever considered? How can our community resolve conflicts when they do arise? Is there a systemic manner to design processes that add value, expedite the process, and resolve issues in an efficient manner?
- The Ombuds team continues to hear from visitors about the lack of communication and respect for **accommodations** that are needed for a student to be successful. Sometimes the students are concerned about how an accommodation request will be received so they fail to discuss it with a TA and/or their professor at the start of the class. It would be helpful if professors would set forth the campus policy on accommodations in their syllabus at the outset of each semester, and highlight this at the first class.
- **Student, Staff, and Faculty mental health concerns** are still very present on campus. Campus wide training would be appropriate to address concerns being raised. The BCC has been working diligently and seems overburdened with visitors. Many students already have off campus resources, and we are seeing more staff and faculty with mental health concerns as well. The new EAP starting at the first of the year may help support the campus employees.
- The Office has been engaged by individuals related to the **campus housing concerns**.
- Students, staff, and administrators have raised concerns about the **Palestinian and Israeli student protest**. The Ombuds Office has offered to be a neutral facilitator so long as these processes are informal in nature, and to date no one has asked for this service. The office continues to be a place where people can come to share and have a place that listens and helps individuals to consider all options as well as the diverse perspectives involved in these difficult discussions.
- The Ombuds Team has heard from student club leaders as well office teams and staff who desire support in creating **Guiding Principles** and ways to establish healthier and more respectful workplace interactions.
- The Ombuds team has also been engaged in supporting and leading **Listening Circles** on the topics of civility, stress on campus, the Middle East war, and mental health concerns.

Appendix – Tabular View of Charts within the Report

Table View of Chart 1: Total Visits from January 2022 through December 2023

| Total Number of Visitors | Spring Semester Jan-May 2022 | Summer Session June-July 2022 | Fall Semester Aug-Dec 2022 | Spring Semester Jan-May 2023 | Summer Session June-July 2023 | Fall Semester Aug-Dec 2023 | Total |
|---------------------------------|-------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|-----------------------------------|-------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|-----------------------------------|--------------|
| <i>Total Number of Visits</i> | 131 | 52 | 112 | 91 | 41 | 96 | 523 |

Table View of Chart 2: Total Visitors from January 2022 through December 2023

| Total Number of Visitors | Spring Semester Jan-May 2022 | Summer Session June-July 2022 | Fall Semester Aug-Dec 2022 | Spring Semester Jan-May 2023 | Summer Session June-July 2023 | Fall Semester Aug-Dec 2023 | Total |
|---------------------------------|-------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|-----------------------------------|-------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|-----------------------------------|--------------|
| <i>Total Visitors</i> | 166 | 74 | 152 | 112 | 46 | 110 | 660 |

Table View of Chart 3: Time Spent with Visitors from January 2022 through December 2023

| Total Hours Spent with Visitors | Spring Semester Jan-May 2022 | Summer Session June-July 2022 | Fall Semester Aug-Dec 2022 | Spring Semester Jan-May 2023 | Summer Session June-July 2023 | Fall Semester Aug-Dec 2023 | Total |
|--|-------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|-----------------------------------|-------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|-----------------------------------|--------------|
| <i>Total Hours Spent with Visitors</i> | 128.75 | 56.75 | 127.25 | 92.5 | 47.0 | 95.25 | 547.5 |

Table View of Chart 4: Percentage of Number of Sessions across Visits from January 2022 through December 2023

| Percentage of Number of Sessions across Visits | Spring Semester Jan-May 2022 | Summer Session June-July 2022 | Fall Semester Aug-Dec 2022 | Spring Semester Jan-May 2023 | Summer Session June-July 2023 | Fall Semester Aug-Dec 2023 |
|---|-------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|-----------------------------------|-------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| <i>Percentage of Number of Sessions across Visits with 1 Session</i> | 66% | 46% | 63% | 63% | 54% | 65% |
| <i>Percentage of Number of Sessions across Visits with 2 Sessions</i> | 14% | 19% | 18% | 12% | 24% | 9% |
| <i>Percentage of Number of Sessions across Visits with 3 or More Sessions</i> | 21% | 35% | 20% | 24% | 22% | 26% |

Table View of Chart 5: Percentage of Mix of Time Spent across Visits from January 2022 through December 2023

| Percentage of Mix of Time Spent with Visitors | Spring Semester Jan-May 2022 | Summer Session June-July 2022 | Fall Semester Aug-Dec 2022 | Spring Semester Jan-May 2023 | Summer Session June-July 2023 | Fall Semester Aug-Dec 2023 |
|---|-------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|-----------------------------------|-------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| <i>Percentage of Mix of Time Spent across Visits of Up to 1 Hour</i> | 63% | 56% | 56% | 60% | 61% | 68% |
| <i>Percentage of Mix of Time Between 1 and 2 hours</i> | 35% | 37% | 36% | 38% | 32% | 31% |
| <i>Percentage of Mix of Time Spent across Visits of 2 or More Hours</i> | 2% | 8% | 8% | 1% | 7% | 1% |

Table View of Chart 6: Percentage of Visitor Populations from January 2022 through December 2023

| Percentage of Visitor Populations | Spring Semester Jan-May 2022 | Summer Session June-July 2022 | Fall Semester Aug-Dec 2022 | Spring Semester Jan-May 2023 | Summer Session June-July 2023 | Fall Semester Aug-Dec 2023 |
|--|-------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|-----------------------------------|-------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| <i>Students</i> | 31% | 34% | 16% | 38% | 20% | 35% |
| <i>Faculty</i> | 17% | 7% | 14% | 11% | 7% | 11% |
| <i>Staff</i> | 48% | 59% | 53% | 46% | 70% | 45% |
| <i>Alumni</i> | 1% | 0% | 0% | 0% | 0% | 4% |
| <i>Other</i> | 2% | 0% | 16% | 4% | 4% | 5% |

Table View of Chart 7: Percentage of Primary Issues across Visits from January 2022 through December 2023

| Percentage of Primary Visitor Issues | Spring Semester Jan-May 2022 | Summer Session June-July 2022 | Fall Semester Aug-Dec 2022 | Spring Semester Jan-May 2023 | Summer Session June-July 2023 | Fall Semester Aug-Dec 2023 |
|--|-------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|-----------------------------------|-------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| <i>Personal (health, family, self)</i> | 16% | 14% | 17% | 22% | 24% | 35% |
| <i>Interpersonal (peer-to-peer personal issue)</i> | 14% | 9% | 14% | 13% | 16% | 15% |
| <i>Education (related to faculty, students, classroom issue)</i> | 15% | 20% | 14% | 23% | 13% | 15% |
| <i>Employment (job-related)</i> | 26% | 36% | 31% | 32% | 36% | 22% |
| <i>COVID-19</i> | 5% | 0% | 1% | 0% | 0% | 0% |
| <i>Diversity and Inclusion</i> | 19% | 16% | 18% | 6% | 6% | 8% |
| <i>Other</i> | 4% | 4% | 4% | 3% | 4% | 5% |