



INTERNATIONAL
OMBUDS
ASSOCIATION

OMBUDS ANNUAL REPORT

2024

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IOA Ombuds

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MESSAGE FROM THE OMBUDS

Hello IOA Members,

We are pleased to present the IOA Ombuds Annual Report for 2024, which reflects the collective efforts of our ombuds team over the past year. In this report, we highlight key observations and share insights, along with considerations for the future.

We are especially grateful for IOA's decision to expand the ombuds program by adding a second ombuds. This expansion offers members greater choice, enhances coverage, and fosters opportunities for collaboration within the team.

Looking ahead to 2025, we remain committed to providing valuable ombuds services and encourage you to reach out to either of us should you wish to discuss any profession-related concerns or issues

Laura & Tyler



Laura C. Smythe



Tyler S. Smith

THE IOA OMBUDS PROGRAM

To support its commitment to its mission and its Code of Ethics and Standards of Practice, the IOA decided to provide organizational ombuds services on a pilot program basis from April 1 to June 30 (extended through July 31) 2020 in connection with its response to the COVID-19 pandemic and the cancellation of the 15th Annual Conference in 2020. The program was extended for a full year through 2021. In the fall of 2021, the IOA Board conducted a membership survey and assessed the IOA Ombuds program effectiveness. Based on the assessment, the IOA Board decided to create a permanent IOA Ombuds role and to develop a Request for Proposal (RFP) process.

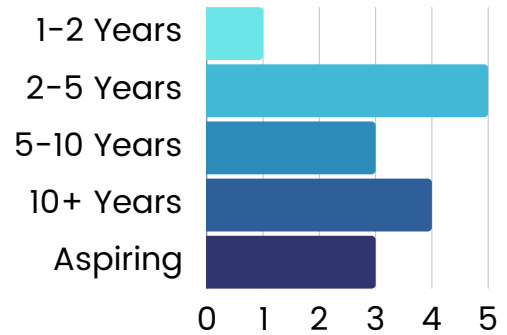
The Ombuds offering is in keeping with IOA's goal to be a professional association that is as supportive, inclusive and accessible as possible for members and 'would-be' conference attendees, regardless of gender, sexual orientation, race/ethnicity, religion, employment status or status in the field. In addition, the IOA desires to model the concept of association ombuds and to demonstrate the ability of an organizational ombuds to improve the conduct and climate of a professional association with aggregate data and anonymized feedback on trends and recommendations from the ombuds to association sponsors.

THE NUMBERS

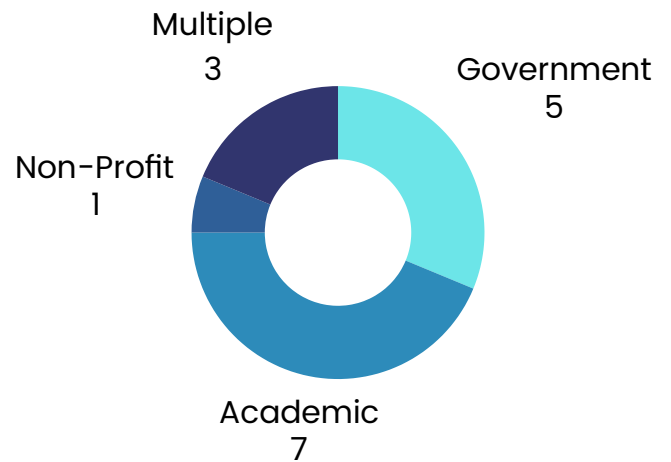
In 2024, we engaged with 16 visitors, representing less than 1.5% of the overall IOA membership. Over the course of the year, we held 35 separate meetings with these visitors, averaging approximately 2 meetings per visitor. This marks a significant decline compared to previous years, in which the Ombuds Program typically saw nearly double the number of visitors.

Further details regarding the visitors and the issues raised are provided. While the distribution of visitors by years of experience and sector aligns closely with the overall makeup of IOA membership, we note that all but one visitor who contacted the Ombuds Program was from the United States.

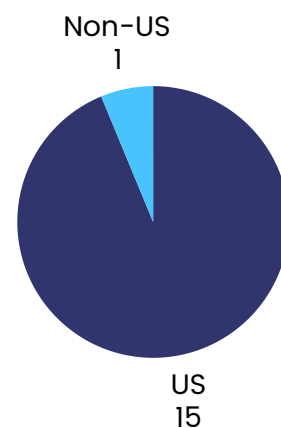
Ombuds Experience



Sector

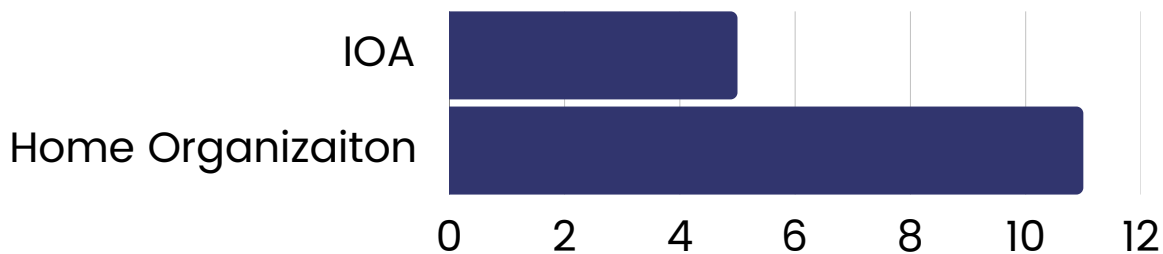


Location



THE NUMBERS

Subject of Issues



Organizational Strategy
3

Values & Ethics
2



Evaluative Relationships
4

Career Development
4

Primary Issues
(Home Inst.)

OBSERVATIONS & CONSIDERATIONS

Given the limited number of cases handled between the two of us in 2024, we are cautious about drawing any substantial conclusions from the basic data or the insights we've gathered from visitors. However, we do wish to highlight a few key observations, which are outlined below.



Visitor Decline

It is important to underscore the relatively small number of cases in 2024—an evident decline compared to previous years. While the exact cause of this shift remains unclear, it is essential to recognize that there are several possible interpretations of this data. One interpretation might suggest that the decrease reflects a reduction in the issues individuals feel the need to bring to the Ombuds, potentially signaling an improvement within the organization. This could indicate that past issues have been addressed effectively or that the mechanisms for ensuring meaningful engagement and active listening for members and participants at IOA events are functioning more successfully. On the other hand, there are alternative interpretations.

OBSERVATIONS & CONSIDERATIONS

The decline could also be attributed to a lack of awareness about the Ombuds Program, barriers to access, or other external factors that have limited members' willingness or ability to seek assistance. Given the complexities involved, these factors are difficult to fully assess at this time.



Enhancing Ombuds Program Awareness

Given the limited number of visitors to the office over the past year, drawing meaningful conclusions from the data is challenging. However, we believe it's worth exploring the potential for greater outreach regarding the Ombuds Program. Several visitors expressed surprise and delight upon learning that the IOA offers an Ombuds service to members and participants of IOA events. This suggests that there may be a gap in awareness. As Ombuds, we may sometimes assume that people are aware of and understand the program, but this may not be the case.

OBSERVATIONS & CONSIDERATIONS

What would it take to raise awareness and enhance understanding? Should we increase the program's visibility on the IOA website? Could we ensure that an Ombuds is present at most events, with an introduction at the start of each gathering? Should we incorporate information about the Ombuds in IOA's regular event emails or consider an announcement on other platforms, such as the "Ombuds Blog"? These are questions we plan to explore further in 2025 and encourage IOA leadership and future Ombuds to consider as well.



Home Organization Challenges

In 2024, while some visitors sought ombuds assistance primarily due to concerns related to their membership in the IOA, the majority reached out to address challenges within their home organizations. These concerns fell into two distinct categories, each reflecting unique issues within their respective organizations. This information is not intended to suggest any trends, but rather to provide insight into some of the reasons why individuals sought assistance.

OBSERVATIONS & CONSIDERATIONS

- **Ombuds in Conflict:** Some visitors were in conflict with another individual within their office or organization. Like all individuals who pride themselves on their interpersonal communication skills and conflict management skills, ombuds, too, struggle at times to gain perspective on how their own behavior may be complicating dynamics and may benefit from an impartial audience with whom to explore perspectives and brainstorm options. We hope the IOA Ombuds Program will continue to offer this important service to its members.

Similar to patterns ombuds typically observed in their case data, many of the challenges faced by ombuds involve "evaluative relationships." It is encouraging that at least one, and possibly more, sessions at the 2025 IOA Annual Conference will focus on this unique topic. We also believe there could be further opportunities for dialogue and professional development related to ombuds in conflict with their colleagues, whether other ombuds or within their own organizations. This is an area worth continued attention by IOA leadership. Additionally, it is important to note that some visitors also sought support in navigating conflicts with IOA colleagues, underscoring the relevance of this topic across the IOA community.

OBSERVATIONS & CONSIDERATIONS

- **Organizational Decision-Making:** Some visitors, due to their unique position within the organization, have the opportunity to hear from various constituencies. However, they may feel that leadership does not fully value or consider their perspective in organizational decision-making. Ombuds may benefit from opportunities to engage in discussions and receive professional development on how, when, and where to advocate for greater consultation with leadership on key organizational decisions.

OBSERVATIONS & CONSIDERATIONS



Observations Gleaned Through Participation & Informal Conversations

It is important to note that the following observations were gleaned while participating in IOA events and through casual conversations that took place in those events.

- **International Inclusion:** There seems to be a growing readiness and eagerness to develop the "International" aspect of IOA. Recent comments and discussions, including at the IOA Annual Conference in 2024, have often focused on the possibility of hosting the annual conference at an international venue. Additionally, there has been growing attention to addressing language barriers and regional colloquialisms in IOA workshops/trainings, conference keynotes and plenary sessions, which may hinder effective communication and understanding.
- **Embedded & Outsourced Ombuds:** There seems to be increasing interest in fostering greater cohesion between different ombuds models, including both embedded and outsourced approaches.

OBSERVATIONS & CONSIDERATIONS

We believe it would be beneficial to create intentional spaces where these two groups can engage in open dialogue—sharing concerns, challenges, questions, and experiences. By encouraging collaboration, ombuds can help shift the perception that these models are in competition with one another and, instead, build an environment where both models work together to elevate the ombuds role as a whole, and further explore views that imply the superiority of one model over the other.

CONTACT US

Please reach out!

We would love to hear your feedback on this report or how we can improve ombuds services to the IOA membership.

If you're an IOA member and would like to schedule a phone or Zoom meeting to discuss an issue or concern related to the ombuds profession, please feel free to reach out to us via the emails provided below.

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Please note: We devote approximately 10 hours per month to this role, and it may take 2-3 business days for you to receive a response. If you require ASL interpretation or another accommodation in order to communicate with the Ombuds, please share this information when you contact us so we may assist with making appropriate accommodations.

Visit the [IOA Ombuds Program website](#) for more information