



INTERNATIONAL  
**OMBUDS**  
ASSOCIATION

# **OMBUDS ANNUAL REPORT**

**2025**

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IOA Ombuds

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>01</b>	Message from the IOA Ombuds
<b>02</b>	The IOA Ombuds Program
<b>03-06</b>	The Numbers
<b>07-11</b>	Observations & Considerations
<b>12</b>	Contact Information



# MESSAGE FROM THE OMBUDS

Hello IOA Members,

We are pleased to present the IOA Ombuds Annual Report for 2025, reflecting the collective efforts of the IOA Ombuds team over the past year. In this report, we highlight key observations, share insights drawn from our work, and offer considerations for the future.



**Laura C. Smythe**

We are grateful for the opportunity to continue serving in our roles as IOA Ombuds and are encouraged to report increased engagement with the ombuds resource throughout 2025.

Looking ahead to 2026, we remain committed to providing responsive and meaningful ombuds services. We encourage you to reach out to either of us if you wish to discuss profession-related concerns, questions, or challenges.



**Tyler S. Smith**

Laura & Tyler

# 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 the IOA community.

# THE NUMBERS

During 2025, the IOA Ombuds Team experienced a notable increase in utilization, with 33 cases and 51 individual visits, compared to 16 cases and 35 individual visits in 2024. While year-to-year fluctuations are expected and caution is warranted in drawing broad conclusions from a single year of data, this increase is nonetheless noteworthy and may reflect greater visibility of the Ombuds Team, which was a goal for this year.

A meaningful portion of cases (11) followed the April Annual Conference, suggesting that in-person professional gatherings continue to function as an important access point for awareness of Ombuds services and for surfacing concerns related to the conference experience. In addition, when convened by the professional organization, the participants also appear to be reflecting on the practices of the organization and what they do and don't understand about its practices and values in action. This pattern is consistent with the informal observation that conferences can serve both as a catalyst for reflection and as settings in which professional tensions, ethical/practice questions, and relational dynamics become more visible.

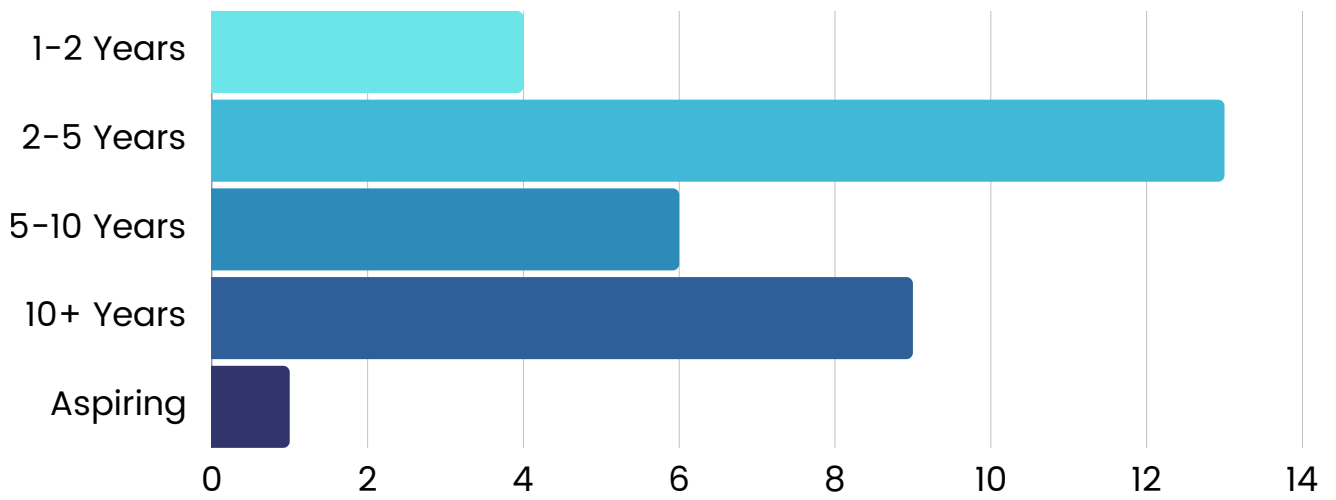
As in prior years, the majority of visitors were affiliated with academic institutions, and most had between two and ten years of professional experience. Cases addressed a wide range of issues, with the most common primary concerns involving **Values and Ethics, Organizational Strategy, and Evaluative Relationships.**

We had 15 cases related to IOA and 13 cases involving visitor's home institutions. In some instances, visitors raised questions about ethical dilemmas or adherence to standards of practice within their own institutions, including situations in which the individual to whom the visitor reported, often another ombuds, was the subject of the concern.

In several cases, these concerns centered on how ombuds managers or leaders navigated internal office conflict, performance management challenges, or differences in practice approach, and whether those responses aligned with the principles and practices they promoted in their professional roles.

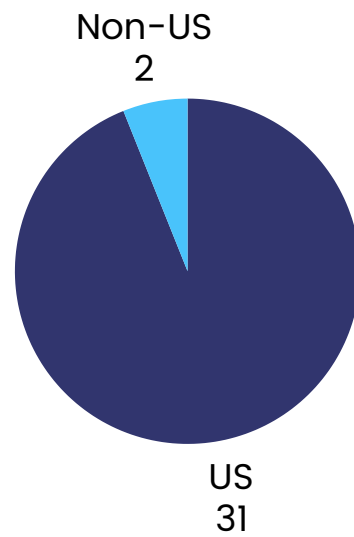
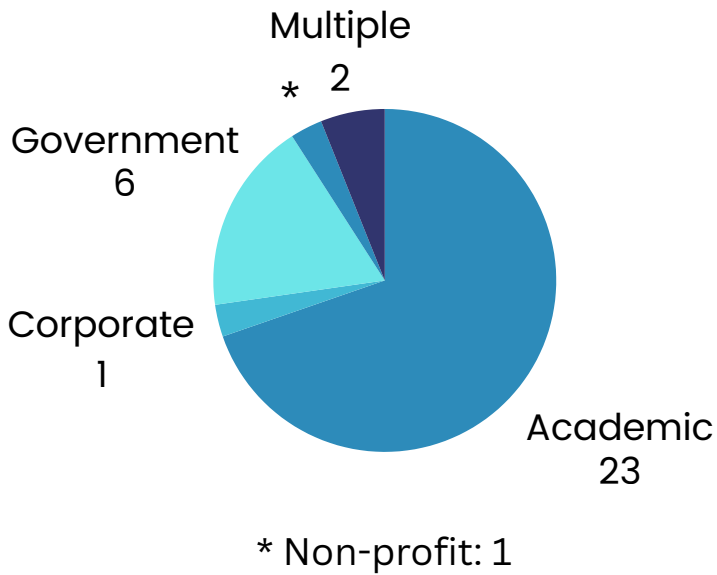
Taken together, these cases highlight the complexity of navigating conflict, power dynamics, accountability, and practice-related ethical obligations within ombuds offices themselves.

## Ombuds Experience

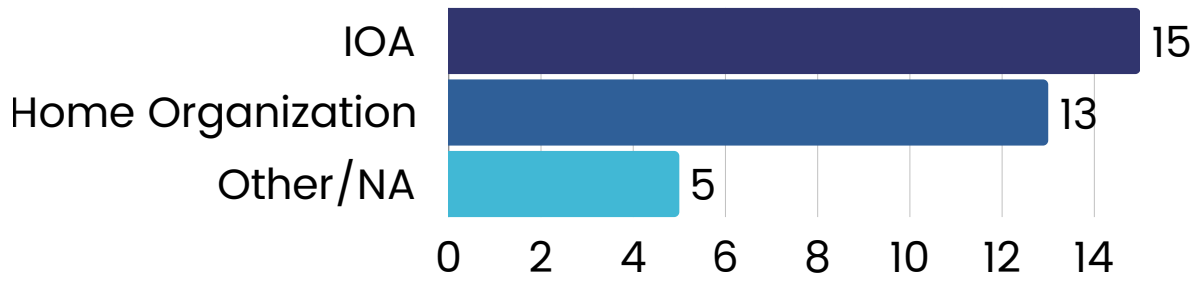


### Sector

### Location



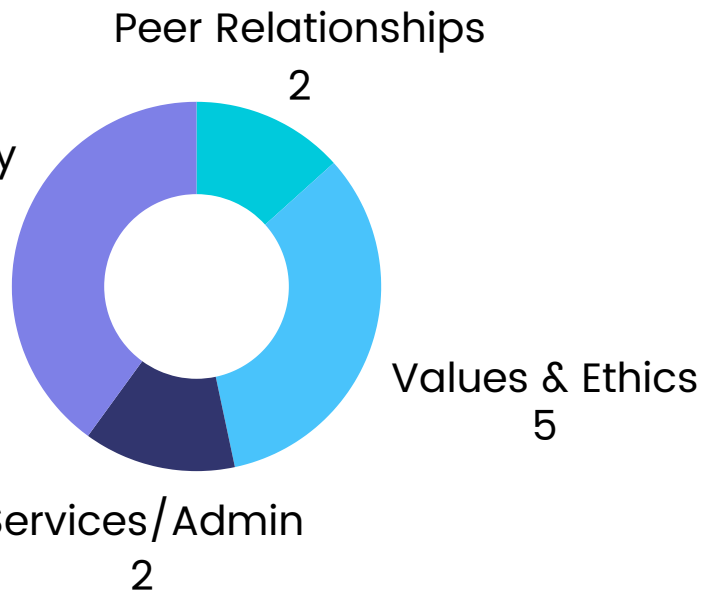
## Subject of Issues



### Primary Issues (IOA)



Org. Strategy  
6



Peer Relationships  
1

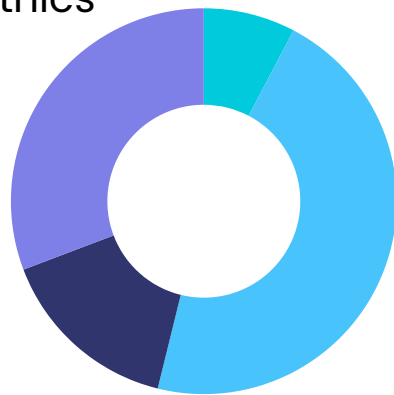
Values & Ethics  
4

### Primary Issues (Home Org.)



Org. Strategy  
2

Eval. Relationships  
6



# OBSERVATIONS & CONSIDERATIONS

Even with a significant increase in cases in 2025, we are cautious about drawing substantial conclusions from basic data or from the insights gathered through visitor interactions. Patterns can be informative, but they are inherently partial and shaped by the context in which concerns are raised. However, we do wish to highlight a few key observations, which are outlined below.

As always, these observations are offered with humility and with recognition of the limits of case data. They reflect what we are hearing and noticing rather than definitive findings or determinations. They are intended not as conclusions, but as invitations for continued conversation, learning, and thoughtful attention to the evolving needs of the profession.



## **Community Values & Professional Conduct**

Consistent with observations noted in the 2024 report, a number of visitors raised concerns about how members of the ombuds community engage with one another in professional spaces, including conferences, committees, and volunteer roles.

Issues centered on collegial interactions, conflict among peers, and the challenge of managing one's own conflict in ways that align with ombuds and other conflict-management-related values.

These concerns do not necessarily reflect widespread misconduct. Rather, they point to the inherent difficulty of consistently modeling best practices within a profession that routinely engages with conflict. They also reflect, we suspect, the expectations we ombuds practitioners have for one another and suspect that our expectations for thoughtful and mindful comportment from our colleagues may be higher than those expectations we have for individuals who do not spend their professional energy in the same way. Continued attention to how community values are articulated, reinforced, and practiced may support trust and psychological safety within professional interactions.



## **Organizational Trust & Decision-Making:**

A recurring theme in cases involving IOA related to perceptions of inconsistent, unclear, or insufficiently transparent decision-making criteria. Visitors raised questions about the processes associated with committee participation, leadership opportunities, awards, involvement in publications, and other forms of professional recognition or engagement.

While the Ombuds team does not assess the merits of individual decisions, these concerns suggest that clarity and transparency around decision-making processes and their underlying rationale, along with clearly articulated avenues for raising questions or feedback, may be important in sustaining member trust and engagement. Absent such clarity, there is a risk that decisions, and the decision-making processes used, may be perceived as misaligned with the values IOA seeks to model and uphold.



## **Dual Roles & Structural Tensions**

A notable number of cases reflected challenges associated with dual-role or collateral-duty ombuds positions. Visitors described tension between institutional expectations tied to multiple roles and their ability to fully uphold IOA Standards of Practice. These situations raise ongoing questions about structural independence, perceived impartiality/independence, and the supports necessary for practitioners to function effectively and consistently with standards within constrained organizational contexts

Relatedly, questions emerged regarding the level of experience and institutional support necessary, or recommended, in order to practice as a solo or independent ombuds. While no single conclusion can be drawn, these inquiries suggest an opportunity for continued professional dialogue around mentorship, readiness, and appropriate safeguards for both practitioners and the organizations they serve.



## Reflections Informed by Conference Themes

Themes raised during the 2025 conference echoed, and in some cases extended beyond, conference-specific contexts. These included:

- **Navigating political discourse with neutrality**, particularly when acknowledging global and national events that affect ombuds work without creating perceptions of political bias.
- **Ongoing dialogue about ombuds models**, including the relative strengths and challenges of embedded and outsourced structures, and whether IOA might play a role in supporting continued discussion outside of conference settings.
- **Leadership as role modeling**, with participants emphasizing the importance of leaders consistently demonstrating the inclusive and ethical behaviors promoted within the profession.
- **Equity and transparency in sponsorships**, including questions about whether sponsorship implies endorsement, how boundaries are defined, and whether sponsorships might be leveraged to increase access.



## **Considerations Moving Forward**

Taken together, these observations suggest several areas for continued reflection and dialogue within IOA and the broader ombuds community. These include supporting practitioners navigating structural constraints, continuing efforts to support one another as professionals who often practice in isolating environments, reinforcing shared professional values in peer interactions, and examining how transparency and consistency in organizational processes influence trust and engagement.

# 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.

**Laura C. Smythe**   
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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