



OFFICE OF OMBUDS SERVICES

ANNUAL OMBUDS REPORT

September 2025 to August 2026

Merry Brown

University Ombuds

September 2026

Annual UT Martin Ombuds Report, Executive Summary

September 2025 to August 2026

UT Martin established the Office of Ombuds Services in August 2025 to provide faculty and staff with a confidential, impartial resource for navigating workplace concerns and conflict. The first year was about building that resource: establishing the office, introducing Ombuds Services across campus, building trust, assisting faculty and staff, and providing education to help people better navigate conflict and workplace relationships.

During the first year, **48 members of the UT Martin community made 59 visits to the Ombuds**. People came for different reasons. Some were dealing with an active workplace concern. Some wanted help preparing for a difficult conversation. Others wanted to understand their options, help a colleague, or simply figure out what to do next. What they had in common was a willingness to take a step toward addressing the situation.

The work of the office also reached well beyond individual visits. Building awareness and trust was an important priority during the first year. The Ombuds met with campus leaders, Faculty Senate, Staff Council, and academic and staff departments to explain what Ombuds Services is, how it works, and when it might be helpful.

Education was another significant part of the first year. **478 faculty, staff, students, and campus leaders participated in 35 workshops, retreats, and educational programs**. Topics included navigating difficult conversations, collegiality, generational collaboration, and healthy work environments. Again and again, people expressed an interest not simply in solving problems, but in finding better ways to work together.

The first year also revealed opportunities for continued support. Among the most prominent were helping employees prepare for difficult conversations, strengthening conflict leadership skills, intentionally developing healthy work environments, and helping employees navigate concerns involving supervisors. Visitors also sought assistance with communication, respect, departmental climate, trust, professionalism, concerns about retaliation, and other workplace issues.

There is much to be encouraged about after the first year. Faculty and staff are using Ombuds Services. Campus leaders and departments are seeking education and support. People across UT Martin are showing an interest in addressing concerns constructively and developing healthier ways to work together.

The goal is not a campus without conflict. Conflict is normal and expected wherever people work together. The goal is a campus increasingly equipped to deal with it well. The Office of Ombuds Services is one resource helping UT Martin do that.

Annual UT Martin Ombuds Report

September 2025 to August 2026

A New Resource for UT Martin

In late August 2025, UT Martin established the Office of Ombuds Services to provide faculty and staff with a confidential, impartial resource for navigating workplace concerns and conflict. Merry Brown was hired as UT Martin's first Ombuds in a part time capacity.

The first year focused on building a trusted, visible, and accessible Ombuds resource for UT Martin faculty and staff. This included developing the Office of Ombuds Services Charter, establishing practices consistent with professional Ombuds standards, creating a dedicated office on campus, building relationships with campus groups and leaders, and providing Ombuds services to faculty and staff.

The [Office of Ombuds Services Charter](#) was approved August 28, 2025, and established the purpose, scope, and principles that guide the work of the office. This first annual report provides a brief look at what the Ombuds office has been doing, how members of the UT Martin community have used this new resource, and some of the opportunities that have emerged during its first year.

What Does an Ombuds Do?

People come to the Ombuds for many reasons. Sometimes they are dealing with an active workplace conflict. Sometimes they are unsure how to approach a difficult conversation or how to respond to a situation with a colleague or supervisor. Leaders may want help thinking through a difficult personnel situation or improving the work environment in their area. At other times, someone simply needs a confidential place to talk through a concern and decide what, if anything, to do next.

The Ombuds can help visitors:

- Clarify what matters most to them
- Think through workplace concerns
- Identify realistic options and possible next steps
- Prepare for a difficult conversation
- Develop strategies for addressing conflict
- Review relevant university policies and processes
- Identify other university resources that may be helpful
- Facilitate conversations or mediate disputes when appropriate
- Raise issues in constructive, non-escalatory ways allowing issues to be addressed at the lowest possible level

The Ombuds does not make decisions for visitors, conduct investigations, determine who is right or wrong, or replace formal university processes. Instead, the Ombuds helps people better understand their situation and their options. The visitor decides what to do next.

Ombuds Activity

First Year at a glance, by the numbers:

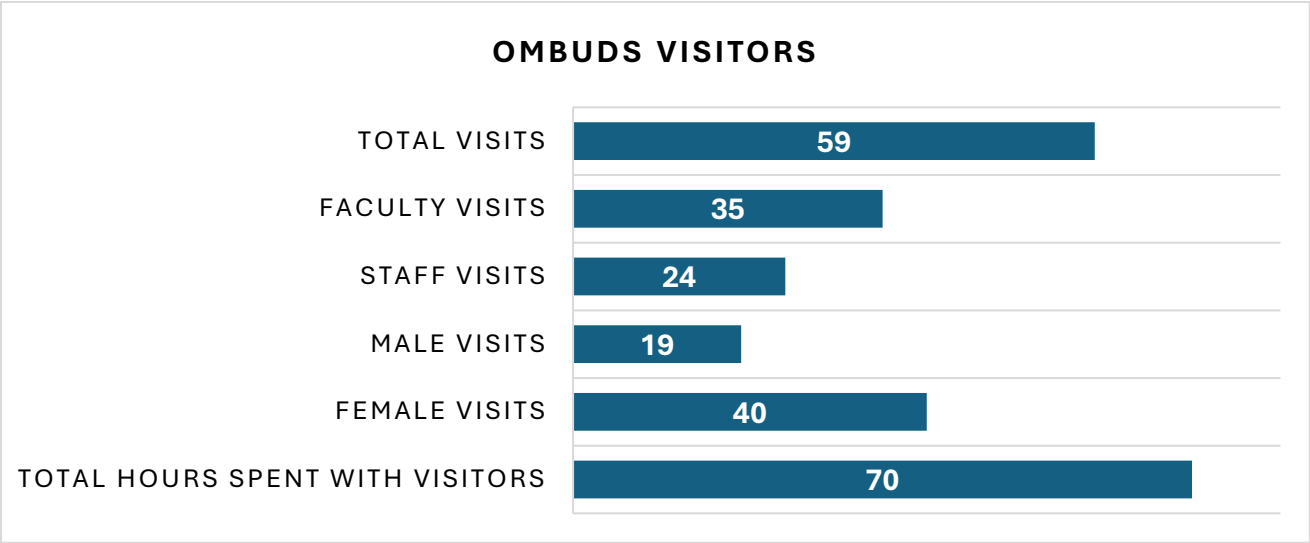


Working with Visitors

During the office’s first year, **48 unique members of the UT Martin community** chose to make a confidential and informal appointment to speak with the UT Martin Ombuds, with a total of 59 visits. 35 visits were from faculty and 24 were from staff.

Each visit was different. Some visitors came once. Others returned as a situation developed. Some wanted help preparing for a conversation. Others wanted to understand their options, think through a decision, or determine whether another university resource might be appropriate.

What these visits had in common was that each person chose to take a step toward addressing a concern, helping a colleague, improving a workplace situation, or determining what to do next. Both research and experience within the Ombuds profession show the value of having a confidential resource where concerns can be addressed early, before they escalate or contribute to disengagement and turnover.



Building Awareness Across Campus

A key focus of the first year was building awareness of the new Office of Ombuds Services and establishing trust in the resource. Faculty and staff needed to know not only that the office existed, but also what the Ombuds does, how the office operates, and when it might be useful to them. During the year, the Ombuds met with and presented to groups across campus, providing a brief introduction to Ombuds services. These included visits with the UT Martin Cabinet, Faculty Senate, Staff Council, the Deans, Directors, and Department Chairs group, and numerous academic and staff departments.



<https://www.utm.edu/offices-and-services/ombuds-services/>

The Ombuds also attended UT Martin Benefits Fairs, communicated directly with faculty and staff throughout the year, developed outreach materials, and maintained a [campus website](#) explaining Ombuds services and [how to make an appointment](#).

Education and Training

Ombuds work is not limited to assisting faculty and staff once conflict has occurred. Education is an important part of helping a community develop the skills and practices needed to address conflict earlier and, when possible, prevent unnecessary conflict.

Fall and spring workshops: 24 sessions

Total participants: Approximately 250

During the fall and spring semesters, the Ombuds office offered educational programs on topics including:

- Navigating Difficult Conversations: Peer to Peer, Part 1 & 2
- Navigating Difficult Conversations: For Managers, Parts 1 & 2
- Collegiality: What It Is, Why It Matters, and How to Practice It
- Winning the Generation Wars at Work: Making (Your) Age an Asset
- Developing Green Flags: Collaboration, Resilience, & Solidarity



Those who attended the Navigating Difficult Conversations workshops received mugs with the session information printed on them for easy reference.

Summer workshops and retreats: 11 sessions

Total participants: Approximately 228

During the summer, the Ombuds provided bespoke workshops, retreats, and training for campus departments and student groups and events, such as ITS, Rec Pro Staff, Cabinet Retreat, Student Success Center, Staff Mentoring Program, DDDC Retreat, Student Health and Counseling, Admissions,

Residence Assistants Mediation Training, Student Rec Center student workers, and UT Martin Scholars Invocation.

These programs focused not only on what to do when conflict occurs, but also on communication, leadership, collegiality, expectations, generational collaboration, and the everyday practices that contribute to a healthy work environment.

Bright Spots

This first year has shown promising signs of how Ombuds Services can serve the UT Martin community.

Perhaps the most important numbers in this report are **48** and **478**. **Forty-eight** members of the UT Martin community decided to take a step and visit the ombuds for a confidential, neutral, and informal conversation to seek assistance for themselves, work through a workplace concern, consider how to help a colleague, or explore what they might do differently in a difficult situation.

Seeking assistance does not necessarily mean something is seriously wrong. Often, it means someone wants to handle a situation well.

Another bright spot has been the level of interest across campus in learning how to do this work better. **Four hundred and seventy-eight** faculty, staff, students, and campus leaders have participated in conversations and educational programs about difficult conversations, conflict, collegiality, leadership, and healthy work environments.

Again and again, people have expressed an interest not simply in solving a particular problem, but in finding better ways to work together.

That is important. Conflict is normal and expected wherever people work together. The question is not whether we will experience conflict. The question is how we will respond to it.

Confidentiality and This Report

Confidentiality is foundational to the work of the Ombuds office. People need a place where they can speak candidly about a concern, explore possibilities, and think through their options.

That commitment necessarily limits what can be shared in an annual report. Therefore, this report does not include descriptions of individual cases, identifying information, or details that could reasonably reveal who visited the office. Even seemingly harmless details can become identifying within a relatively small community.

For that reason, the observations that follow are intentionally broad. They are not descriptions of particular people, departments, or cases. Rather, they identify areas where members of the UT Martin community have sought assistance and areas where continued education and support may be useful.

Issues and Opportunities

Navigating Difficult Conversations

One of the clearest areas of need has been to help prepare for difficult workplace conversations.

These conversations take many forms: peer to peer, manager to employee, and employee to manager. Visitors may need to raise concerns, address performance, respond to behavior that is affecting their work, clarify expectations, or repair a working relationship. Conflict coaching can help someone slow down, identify the actual problem, consider different approaches, map possible next steps, and prepare to communicate clearly and constructively.

The goal is not to eliminate difficult conversations. It is to help people become better equipped to have them.

Conflict Leadership

Leaders are regularly called upon to respond to conflict. They may need to address poor performance, clarify expectations, respond to tension among employees, make difficult decisions, or intervene before a problem grows.

These situations require more than knowledge of policies and procedures. They also require judgment, communication skills, consistency, and the ability to remain constructive when a situation becomes difficult.

Continued conflict leadership coaching and education can help supervisors develop greater confidence and skill in this part of their work.

Healthy Work Environments

Another area of significant interest has been how to intentionally develop and sustain healthy work environments.

Healthy workplaces do not happen simply because people have good intentions. They are shaped by everyday practices: how expectations are communicated, how decisions are explained, how concerns are addressed, how people are treated, how leaders respond when something goes wrong, and whether difficult issues are allowed to linger.

The interest shown by departments and leaders in examining these practices represents an important opportunity for continued education and conversation.

Navigating Concerns with Supervisors

Employees also sought assistance thinking through concerns involving supervisors.

These situations can be particularly difficult because of the power differences inherent in the relationships at issue. Employees may be unsure whether to raise a concern, how to raise it, what options are available, or what might happen if they speak up.

The Ombuds provides a confidential place to think through these questions, explore options, prepare for a conversation, and identify other resources when appropriate.

Other Issues and Opportunities

Visitors brought a range of related workplace concerns to the Ombuds office. These included respect among colleagues, communication, departmental climate, trust, concerns about retaliation, work related stress, professionalism, compliance, the first six-month probationary period, and career advancement.

While these concerns varied, they often involved a common need: a confidential place to think through a situation, better understand available options, and decide what steps, if any, to take next.

Looking Ahead

The first year of Ombuds Services has been about establishing a new resource and developing relationships and trust across campus. The coming year will build on that foundation.

Priorities for 2026 to 2027 include:

- Continuing to increase awareness and understanding of Ombuds Services
- Continuing workshops and educational opportunities for faculty, staff, and leaders
- Launching the *UTM Generations Collaborative: Building Multigenerational Partnerships Across Campus*
- Continuing professional education and development in organizational Ombuds practice
- Listening for emerging concerns and opportunities that may benefit the broader UT Martin community
- Establishing a permanent location for the Office of Ombuds Services

The goal is not a campus without conflict. Conflict, disagreement, misunderstandings, and difficult decisions are inevitable in a community of people working together. The goal is a community that is increasingly well equipped to deal with them.

Ombuds Services offers one place where faculty and staff can begin that work: privately considering a concern, understanding their options, preparing for a difficult conversation, or finding a constructive way forward.

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Office of Ombuds Services, UT Martin
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