

Office of the Ombuds

University of California, Merced

Annual Report 2024-2025

The Office of the Ombuds at UC Merced is a confidential, safe, and informal resource available to all members of our community. It is a place to seek guidance and support in navigating conflicts, addressing complaints, or raising concerns involving colleagues, classmates, supervisors, or others on campus without fear of retaliation.

When you visit the Ombuds, you can expect a supportive and impartial process. The Ombuds will listen carefully, help you explore options, provide referrals when appropriate, make inquiries, and, if desired, facilitate constructive conversations and resolutions.

Engaging with our office is always voluntary. We are guided by the ethical principles and Standards of Practice of the International Ombuds Association (IOA): **confidentiality, impartiality, informality, and independence**. The Office of the Ombuds complements—but does not replace—the University’s formal grievance and complaint processes.

Most importantly, communications with the Ombuds are confidential and do not place the University on notice of their content.

Executive Summary

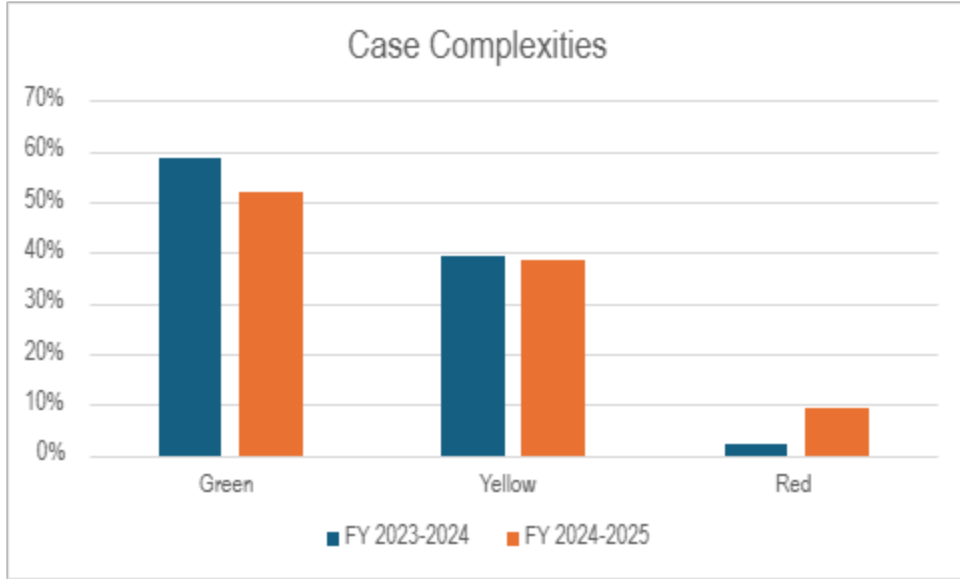
The Office of the Ombuds experienced a notable increase in visitors this year, reflecting both greater awareness of our services and the trust the UC Merced community places in our office. While many cases involved the types of concerns commonly seen by Office of the Ombuds, we also supported a growing number of highly complex situations.

To help track case complexity, we use a simple color-coded system:

- **Green:** straightforward cases, typically involving fewer than four people and primarily interpersonal concerns.
- **Yellow:** more participants, multiple issues, and potentially significant consequences.
- **Red:** highly complex matters, often extending over several months or affecting multiple areas of the university.

This year, we saw an additional 7% of Red cases, underscoring a shift toward more serious and wide-ranging challenges. It is also important to note that each case may require anywhere from an hour to several hours—or, in the most complex instances, several days of sustained engagement.

Case Complexities	FY 2023-2024	FY 2024-2025
Green	59%	52%
Yellow	39%	39%
Red	2%	9%



As a result, the Office of the Ombuds remained consistently busy throughout the year. While the increase in both the number and complexity of cases can be interpreted in many ways, one conclusion is clear: the UC Merced community continues to make meaningful use of the Office of the Ombuds. Looking ahead, we anticipate an even busier year and warmly encourage community members to take advantage of our services whenever support may be helpful.

Overview

Between July 1, 2024 and June 30, 2025 (“2025”), the Office of the Ombuds at UC Merced handled 235 unique visits, some with multiple visitors, for a total of 255 UC Merced students, faculty and staff. This was a 17% increase from the prior year.

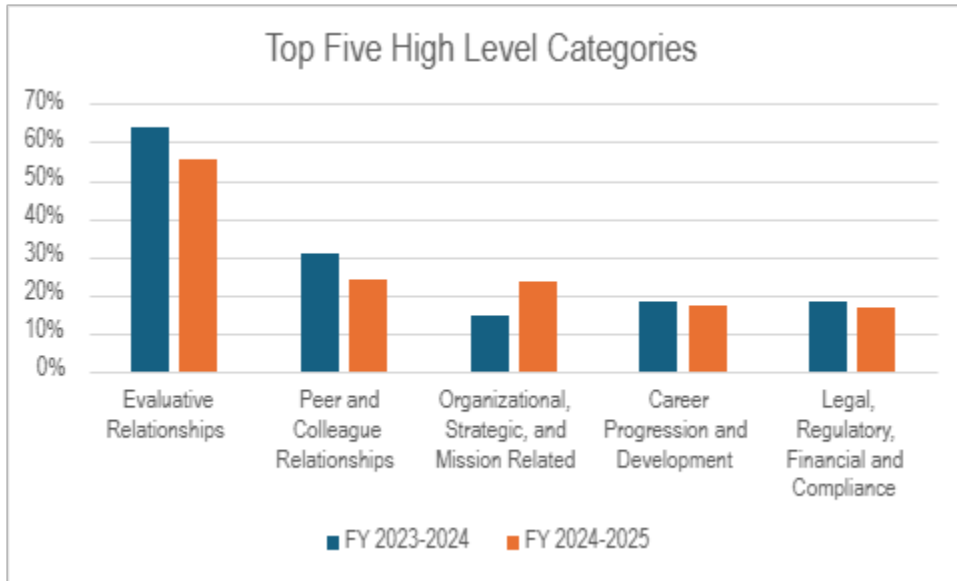
Outreach/Training

In addition to one-on-one consults, the Office of the Ombuds conducts outreach and training.

Outreach/Training	FY 2023-2024	FY 2024-2025
Mediation/Group Facilitation	7	8
OO & Partner Trainings	4	4
Other	3	0
Outreach Events	13	15
Tailored Outreach	17	16
Tailored Training	9	21
Panels	1	2
Total	54	66

Top Five High Level Category Complaints

High Level Categories	FY 2023-2024	FY 2024-2025
Evaluative Relationships	64%	56%
Peer and Colleague Relationships	31%	24%
Organizational, Strategic, and Mission Related	15%	23%
Career Progression and Development	18%	17%
Legal, Regulatory, Financial and Compliance	18%	17%



“Evaluative Relationships” continue to be the most common category of concerns raised by faculty, staff, and students. This category includes questions, issues, and conflicts that arise between individuals in hierarchical or evaluative relationships—such as supervisor and employee, or faculty and student. This enduring pattern is not unique to our campus; it reflects the inherent power differentials embedded in these relationships. When one party holds evaluative authority over another, there can be heightened sensitivity and real or perceived loss of psychological safety.

“Peer and Colleague Relationships” concerns dropped from 30.16% to 23.4% over the past year. This decline may indicate that interpersonal conflicts are occurring less frequently—or that individuals are increasingly recognizing their concerns as rooted in broader organizational dynamics rather than isolated peer interactions.

At the same time, “Organizational, Strategic and Mission” issues rose from 14.8% to 23.4%, suggesting a shift in the nature of the conflicts reaching the Office of the Ombuds. Rather than centering on personal relationships, more visitors are bringing forward concerns tied to systemic or institutional changes, such as shifting priorities, structural realignments, or evolving strategic goals.

This pattern reflects a growing awareness of how larger organizational currents shape individual experiences.

Concerns involving “Career Progression and Development” and “Legal, Regulatory, Financial and Compliance” issues were cited by the same percentage of visitors in FY2024 (18%) and FY2023 (17%), showing that these concerns have not grown (or significantly dropped) over the last year, but are still significant concerns of visitors.

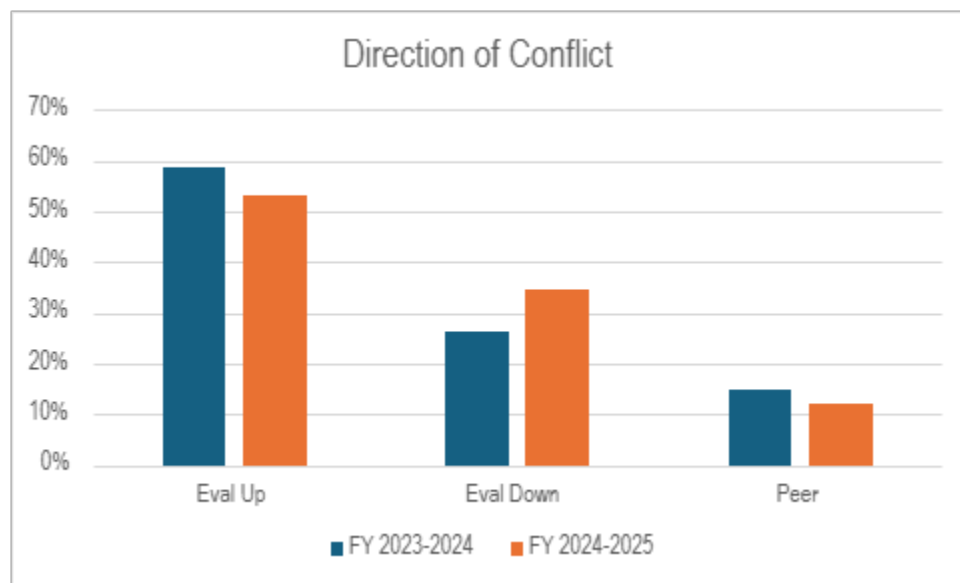
Visitor Demographics and Data Collection

The Office of the Ombuds collects high-level demographic information through a voluntary disclosure form. Visitors may choose to share details such as demographics, role, union affiliation, workplace location, length of concern, department or school, prior steps taken, and whom they consulted before visiting the Ombuds. Participation is always optional.

In addition, using the International Ombuds Association (IOA) Uniform Reporting Categories along with office-specific questions, we track the nature of issues raised, actions taken by the Ombuds, perceived and associated risks to the university, emerging themes, services provided, mental health impact descriptions, and outcomes. Because many visitors bring more than one concern, cases may be reflected in multiple categories throughout this report.

Direction of Conflict – Up/Down/Peer Dynamics

Eval Up/Eval Down/Peer	FY 2023-2024	FY 2024-2025
Eval Up	59%	53%
Eval Down	26%	35%
Peer	15%	12%

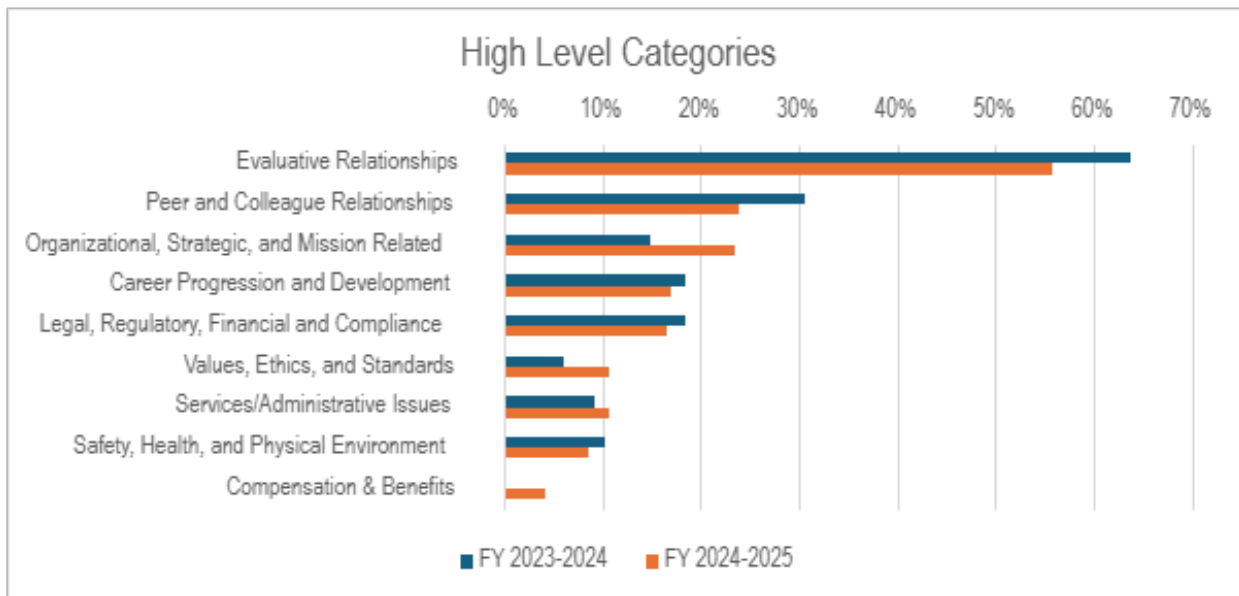


We track the direction of conflict to better understand power dynamics between parties. This year, there was a decline in conflicts moving upward, meaning fewer cases involved individuals with less power, raising concerns about those in positions of greater authority. In contrast, there was an increase in downward conflict, where supervisors or individuals with more power brought concerns involving those with less power. This shift may reflect a rise in employee performance issues or indicate that mid-level managers and faculty are experiencing heightened pressure, possibly due to budget cuts, resource constraints, or organizational change.

Uniform Reporting Categories – Nine High-Level Categories

The Office of the Ombuds tracks nine high-level categories (The Uniform Reporting Categories or URCs) established by the International Ombud Association (IOA).

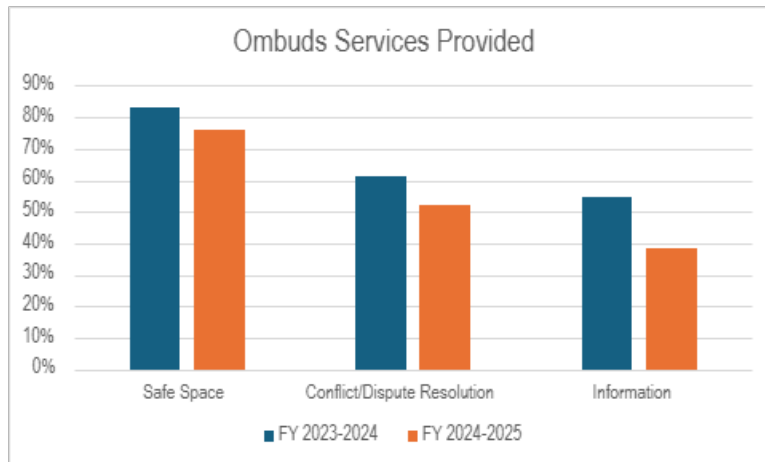
High Level Categories	FY 2023-2024	FY 2024-2025
Evaluative Relationships	64%	56%
Peer and Colleague Relationships	31%	24%
Organizational, Strategic, and Mission Related	15%	23%
Career Progression and Development	18%	17%
Legal, Regulatory, Financial and Compliance	18%	17%
Values, Ethics, and Standards	6%	11%
Services/Administrative Issues	9%	11%
Safety, Health, and Physical Environment	10%	9%
Compensation & Benefits	0%	4%



Evaluative Relationships, Peer and Colleague Relationships, and Organizational, Strategic & Mission-Related Issues remain the top three areas of concern within the UC Merced community. Yet beneath the surface, the current has shifted. Concerns tied to individual relationships—Evaluative and Peer—fell by 8% and 7% respectively, while Organizational, Strategic & Mission-Related issues rose by 8%. This movement signals a turning point: as UC Merced navigates structural changes, budget constraints, and evolving priorities, community members are increasingly framing their concerns through a systemic lens, naming forces and structures rather than individual actors. It reflects a collective awareness that many challenges are not just personal tensions, but part of a larger institutional story.

Ombuds Services Provided

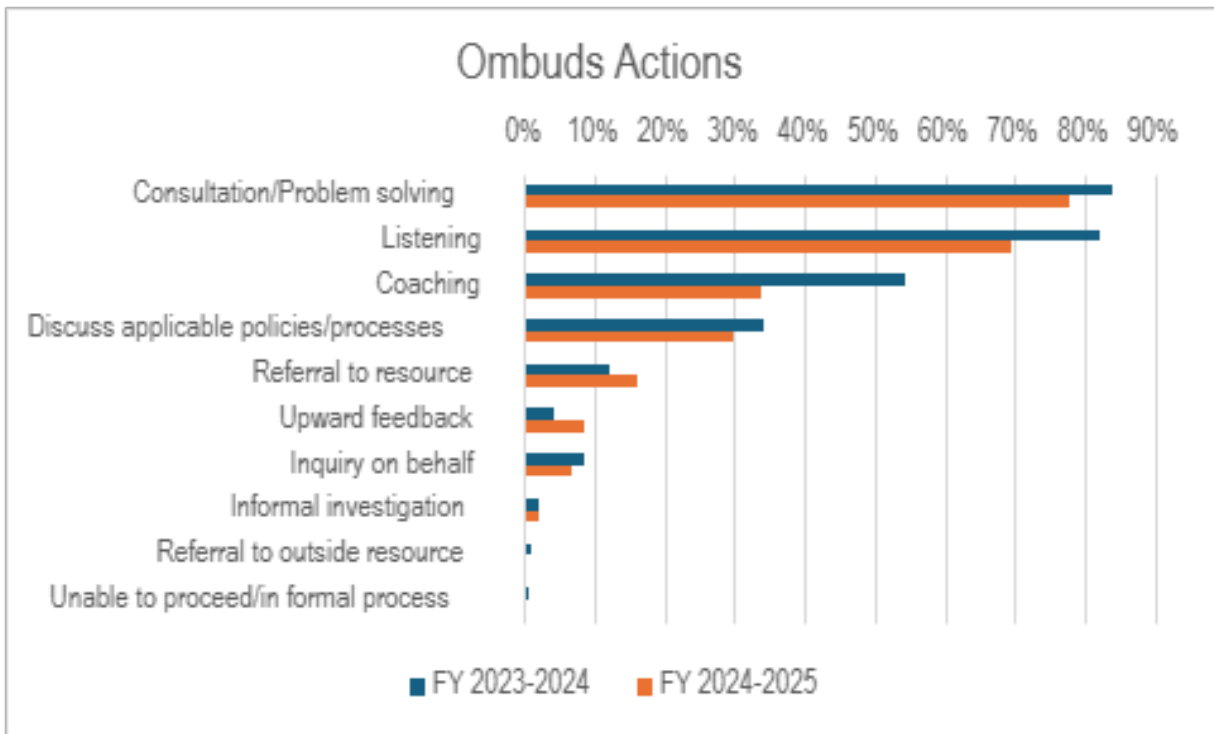
Services Provided	FY 2023-2024	FY 2024-2025
Safe Space	83%	76%
Conflict/Dispute Resolution	61%	52%
Information	55%	39%



The Office of the Ombuds continues to provide a safe space for the UC Merced Community where they can raise issues, concerns and conflicts in a barrier-free environment. Providing Conflict/Dispute Resolution coaching and information are also key services provided by the Ombuds.

Ombuds Actions

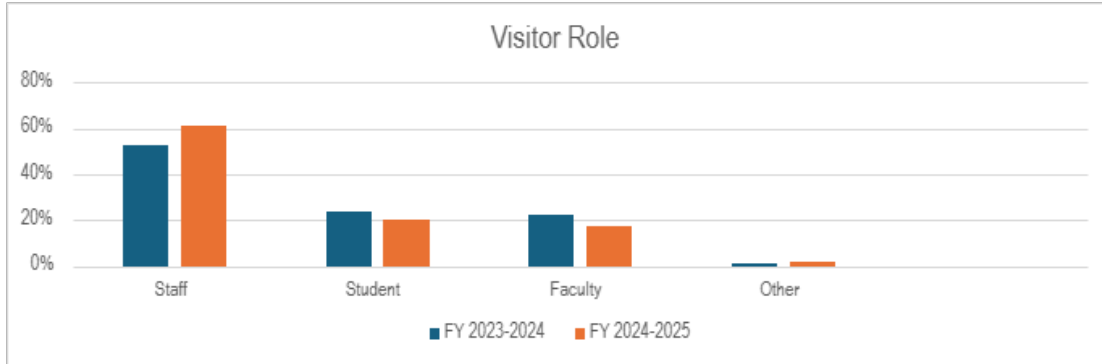
Ombuds Actions	FY 2023-2024	FY 2024-2025
Consultation/Problem solving	84%	78%
Listening	82%	70%
Coaching	54%	34%
Discuss applicable policies/processes	34%	30%
Referral to resource	12%	16%
Upward feedback	4%	9%
Inquiry on behalf	9%	7%
Informal investigation	2%	2%
Referral to outside resource	1%	0.4%
Unable to proceed/in formal process	0.5%	0%



This year, visitors came not only to be heard but to take some type of action. While listening and coaching declined, problem-solving remained at the heart of the Office of the Ombuds work. Also, upward feedback more than doubled. This shift suggests that visitors are arriving with more complex concerns and a clearer call for systemic change. Our hope is that this rise in referrals and upward feedback reflects a community that is naming bigger forces and trusting the Ombuds as a bridge between individual experiences and institutional change and learning.

Visitor Roles

Role	FY 2023-2024	FY 2024-2025
Staff	53%	61%
Student	23%	20%
Faculty	22%	17%
Other	2%	2%

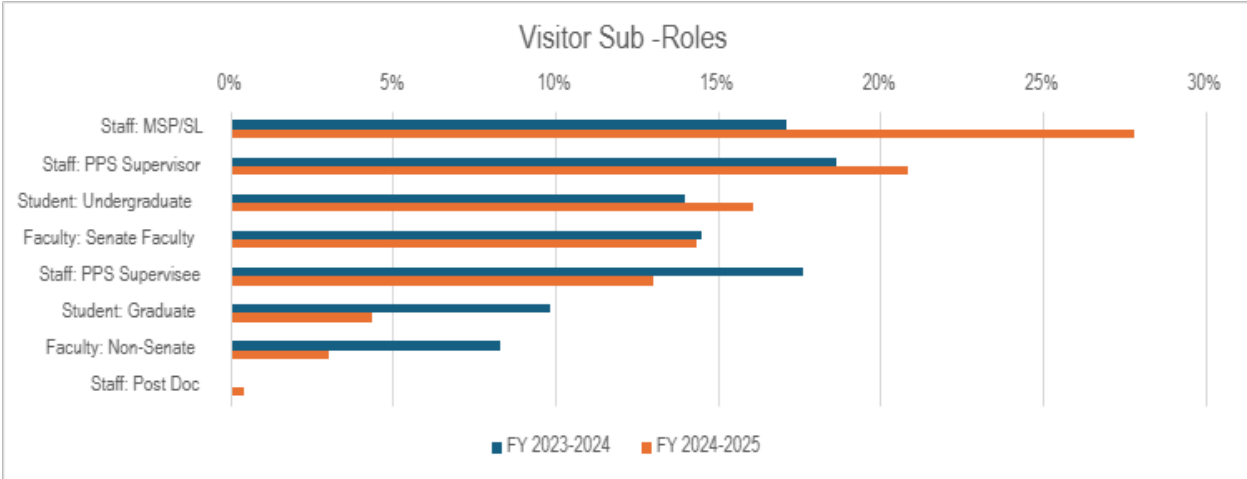


The pattern of who walked through the Ombuds doors this year shifted in meaningful ways. Staff visitors rose to 61%, an eight-point increase from the previous year. This upward trend suggests a deepening trust in the Ombuds as a resource—particularly among those working in operational roles.

Meanwhile, student visits dipped from 23% to 20%, and faculty engagement decreased from 22% to 17%. Together, these changes reflect an evolving community where staff voices are increasingly at the forefront. They also signal an opportunity to renew outreach and awareness efforts among faculty and students, ensuring that all members of the campus community know how and when to access Ombuds support.

Visitor Sub-Roles

Sub-Role	FY 2023-2024	FY 2024-2025
Staff: MSP/SL	17%	28%
Staff: PPS Supervisor	19%	21%
Student: Undergraduate	14%	16%
Faculty: Senate Faculty	15%	14%
Staff: PPS Supervisee	18%	13%
Student: Graduate	10%	4%
Faculty: Non-Senate	8%	3%
Staff: Post Doc	0%	0.4%



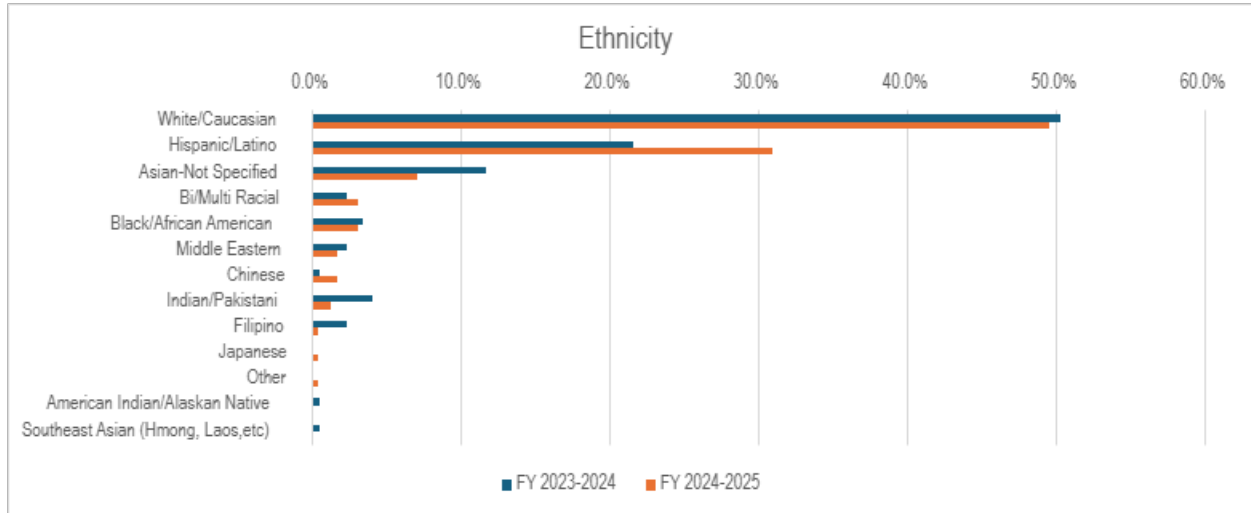
This year, MSP/SL visitors rose from 17% to 28%, the most significant increase across all sub-roles. This sharp rise suggests that individuals in managerial and senior leadership positions are turning to the Ombuds in greater numbers, perhaps reflecting both the complexity of the issues they face and their growing confidence in confidential, informal support.

PPS Supervisees dropped from 18% to 13%, a notable decline.

Also, Postdocs increased to .04%, indicating a small but important new point of engagement this year.

Visitor Type by Ethnicity

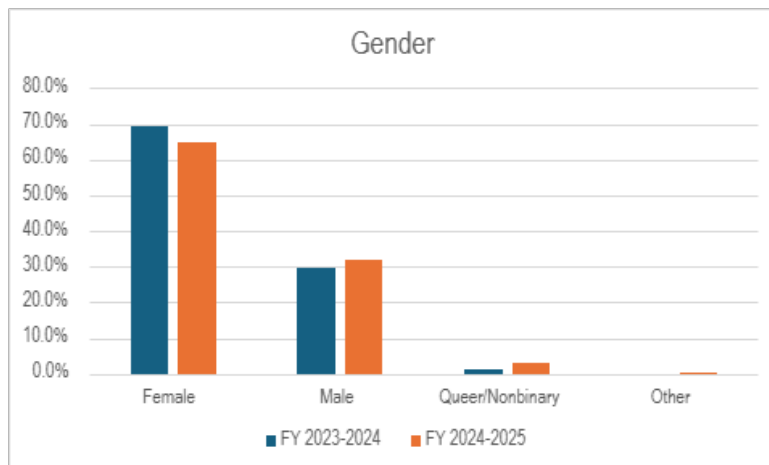
Ethnicity	FY 2023-2024	FY 2024-2025
White/Caucasian	50.3%	49.6%
Hispanic/Latino	21.6%	31.0%
Asian-Not Specified	11.7%	7.1%
Bi/Multi Racial	2.3%	3.1%
Black/African American	3.5%	3.1%
Middle Eastern	2.3%	1.8%
Chinese	0.6%	1.8%
Indian/Pakistani	4.1%	1.3%
Filipino	2.3%	0.4%
Japanese	0.0%	0.4%
Other	0.0%	0.4%
American Indian/Alaskan Native	0.6%	0.0%
Southeast Asian (Hmong, Laos,etc)	0.6%	0.0%



The ethnic composition of the Ombuds visitors this year reflects both continuity and change within the UC Merced community. While the proportion of Caucasian visitors remained steady, the Office of the Ombuds saw an increase in Hispanic engagement, rising nearly ten 10% – a promising sign of growing trust and awareness among a historically underrepresented group. The patterns reflected in this data set invite ongoing reflection on how the Office of the Ombuds can ensure that the entire UC Merced community feels both seen and welcome in seeking Ombuds support.

Visitor by Gender

Gender	FY 2023-2024	FY 2024-2025
Female	69.4%	64.8%
Male	29.6%	31.7%
Queer/Nonbinary	1.1%	3.1%
Other	0.0%	0.4%

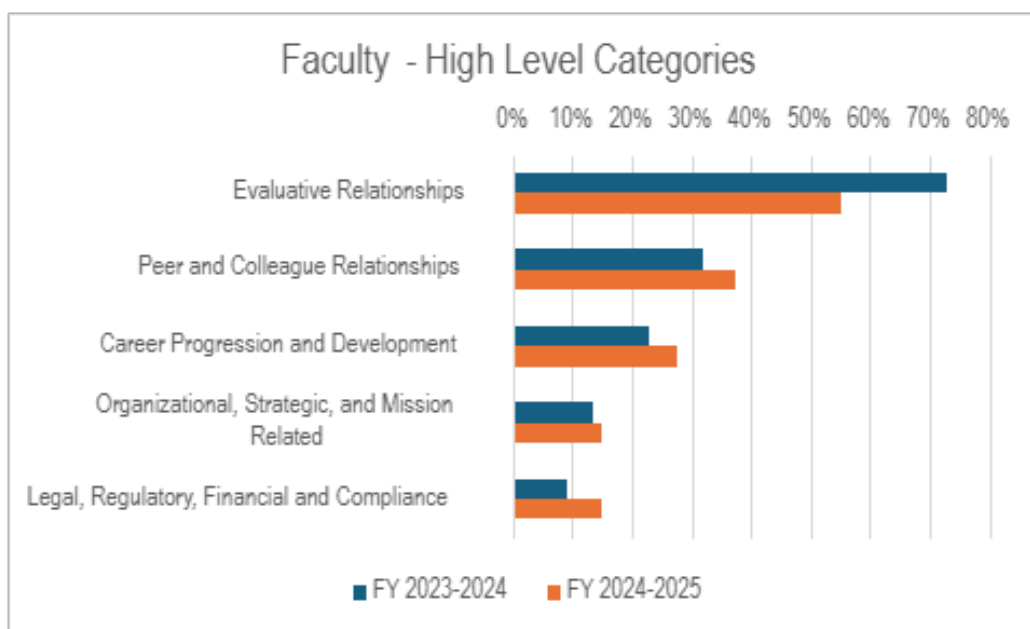


There was a decrease in female visitors to the Office of the Ombuds, while male visitors increased from 29.6% to 31.7%. It's important to note that Queer/Nonbinary visitors rose significantly. This could indicate growing engagement from gender-diverse visitors. These trends suggest a positive shift in inclusivity, with more diverse gender identities seeking Ombuds support. The decrease in female visitors may warrant further exploration to ensure that all genders feel equally supported and represented in the Office of the Ombuds.

Top Concerns by Constituent Role

Faculty

High Level Categories - Faculty	FY 2023-2024	FY 2024-2025
Evaluative Relationships	73%	55%
Peer and Colleague Relationships	32%	38%
Career Progression and Development	23%	28%
Organizational, Strategic, and Mission Related	14%	15%
Legal, Regulatory, Financial and Compliance	9%	15%



Among faculty, the types of concerns shifted in telling ways. Evaluative Relationships fell sharply from 73% to 55%, suggesting a possible easing or reframing of tensions with supervisors, chairs, and other leaders. At the same time, Peer and Colleague Relationships rose from 32% to 38%, and Career Progression and Development climbed from 23% to 28%, hinting at a growing desire for support

around collegial dynamics and professional pathways. Equally striking is the rise in Legal, Regulatory, Financial, and Compliance issues from 9% to 15% marking an uptick in structural and policy-related concerns. Taken together, these shifts suggest faculty experiences are broadening, moving beyond hierarchical strains toward a more textured mix of interpersonal, developmental, and systemic challenges.

Staff

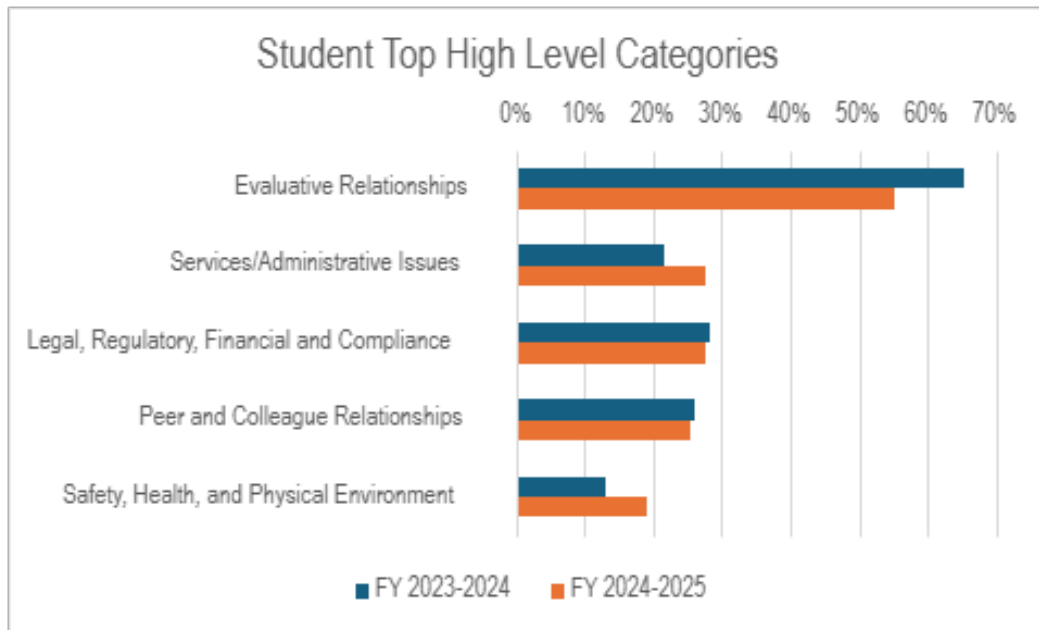
High Level Categories - Staff	FY 2023-2024	FY 2024-2025
Evaluative Relationships	61%	56%
Organizational, Strategic, and Mission Related	22%	34%
Peer and Colleague Relationships	33%	20%
Career Progression and Development	19%	17%
Legal, Regulatory, Financial and Compliance	18%	13%



While “Evaluative Relationships” remains the most common category, it has decreased, suggesting a gradual easing of supervisor/employee tensions or improved conflict management within hierarchical structures. At the same time, staff are increasingly bringing forward issues that touch on larger institutional structures or systems. This trend suggests that many staff members are navigating uncertainty tied to structural or policy shifts. This data set highlights a community seeking stability in the midst of change.

Students

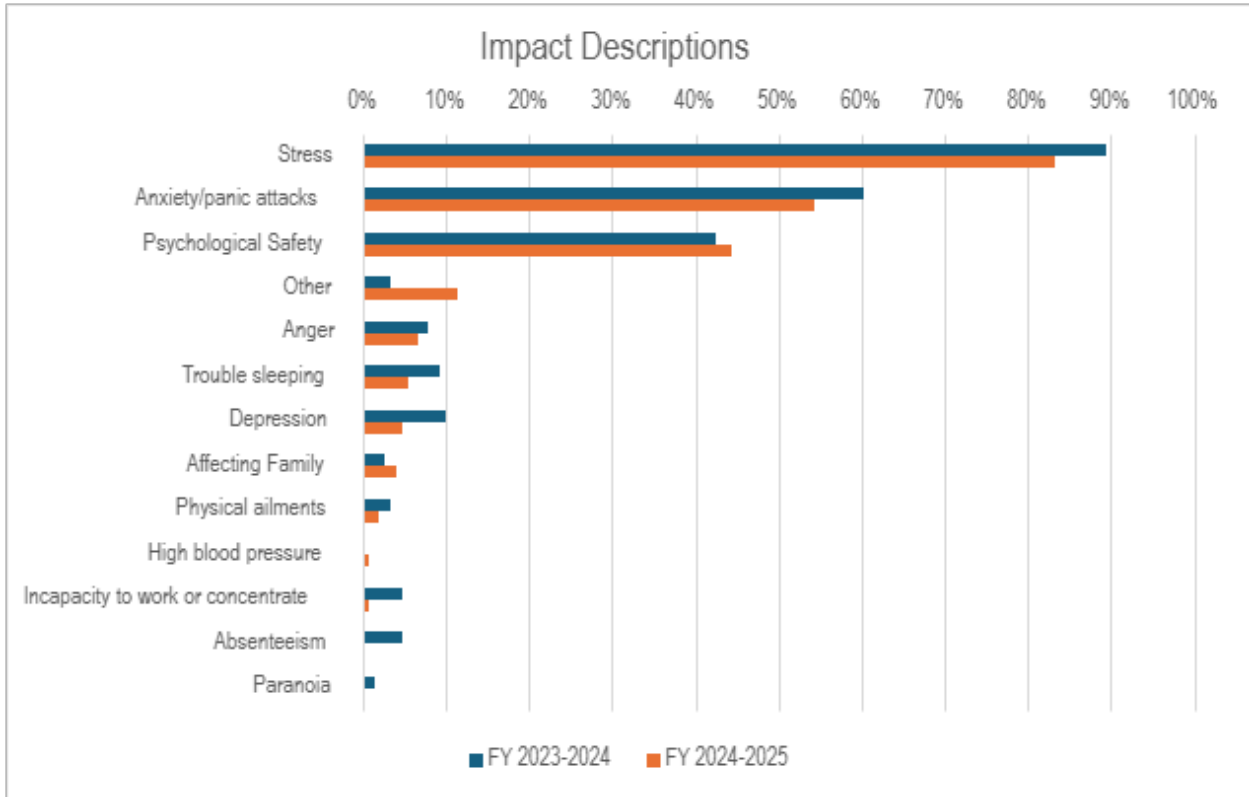
High Level Categories - Students	FY 2023-2024	FY 2024-2025
Evaluative Relationships	65%	55%
Services/Administrative Issues	22%	28%
Legal, Regulatory, Financial and Compliance	28%	28%
Peer and Colleague Relationships	26%	26%
Safety, Health, and Physical Environment	13%	19%



Student concerns this year tell a story of growing engagement with the broader systems that shape their university experience. While evaluative relationships remain prevalent, their steady decline may indicate improvements in academic communication and trust. In contrast, the rise in administrative and service-related matters, along with a notable increase in safety and well-being concerns, suggests that students continue to face a complex blend of interpersonal and systemic challenges.

Impact Descriptions

Impact Descriptions (among visitors reporting impact)	FY 2023-2024	FY 2024-2025
Stress	89%	83%
Anxiety/panic attacks	60%	54%
Psychological Safety	42%	44%
Other	3%	11%
Anger	8%	7%
Trouble sleeping	9%	5%
Depression	10%	5%
Affecting Family	3%	4%
Physical ailments	3%	2%
High blood pressure	0%	1%
Incapacity to work or concentrate	5%	1%
Absenteeism	5%	0%
Paranoia	1%	0%



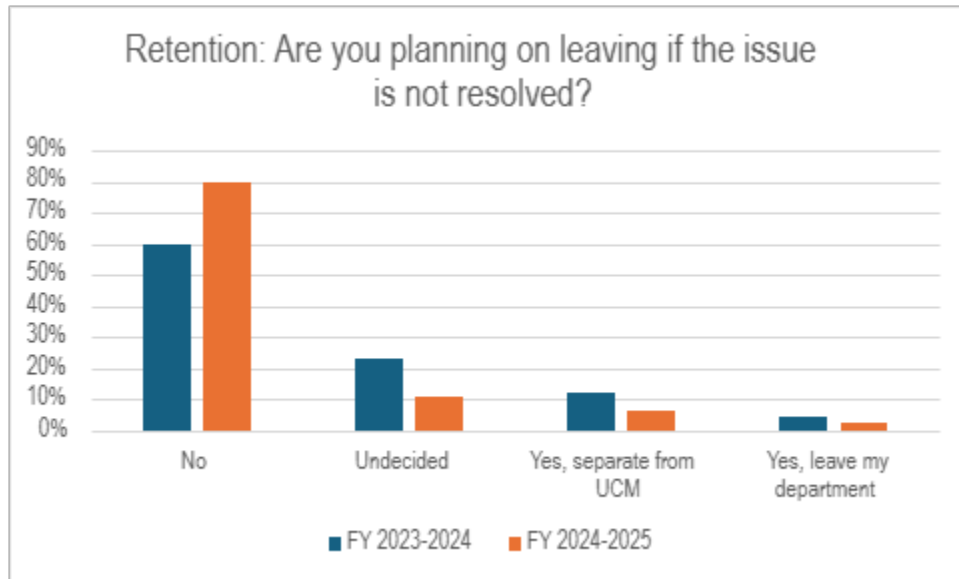
This year’s data illuminates a subtle but encouraging shift in how individuals experience and manage conflict. While stress and anxiety remain the most common emotional impact, their gradual decline

may indicate that visitors are seeking support sooner or developing stronger resilience strategies. The increase in those reporting no impact is particularly noteworthy, suggesting that the presence of supportive resources, including the Office of the Ombuds, may be helping people address issues before they escalate.

Furthermore, initiatives such as Compassionate Listening and 3 Practice Circles have possibly contributed to this gradual shift, offering individuals tools to regulate emotion, communicate with empathy, and transform reactive conflict into reflective dialogue.

Retention

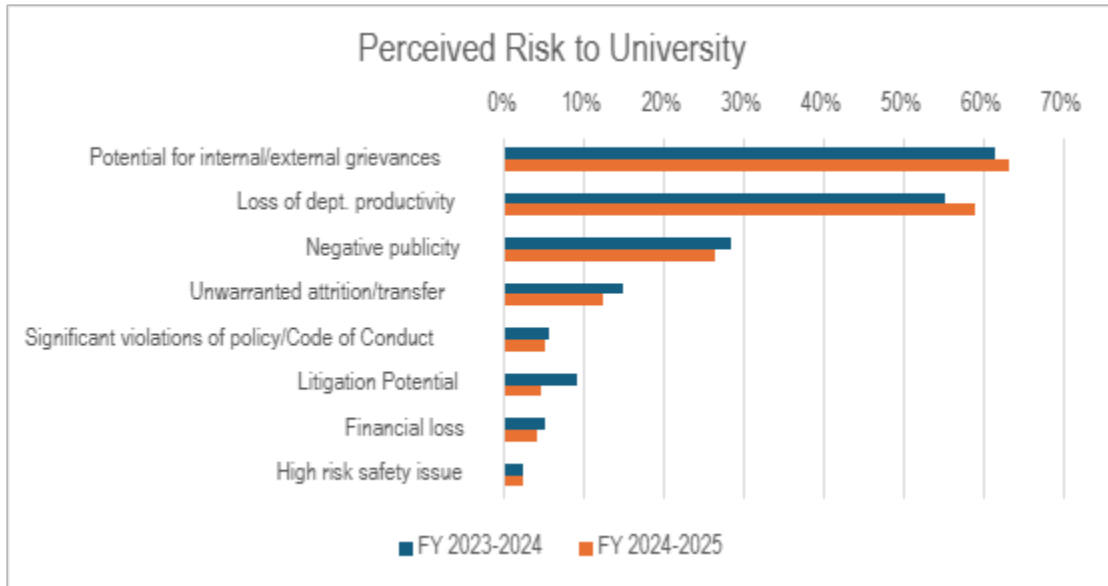
Are you planning on leaving if the issue is not resolved?	FY 2023-2024	FY 2024-2025
No	60%	80%
Undecided	23%	11%
Yes, separate from UCM	12%	6%
Yes, leave my department	5%	3%



The data indicates a clear shift toward greater constituent retention in terms of visitor intentions. Those who were undecided dropped sharply from 23% to 11%. There was also a decrease in the % of people who were planning on departing UC Merced. The decline in turnover intentions is a positive indicator for organizational climate and employee engagement. This also implies that visitors are increasingly willing to seek resolution and remain within the institution.

Perceived Risks to University

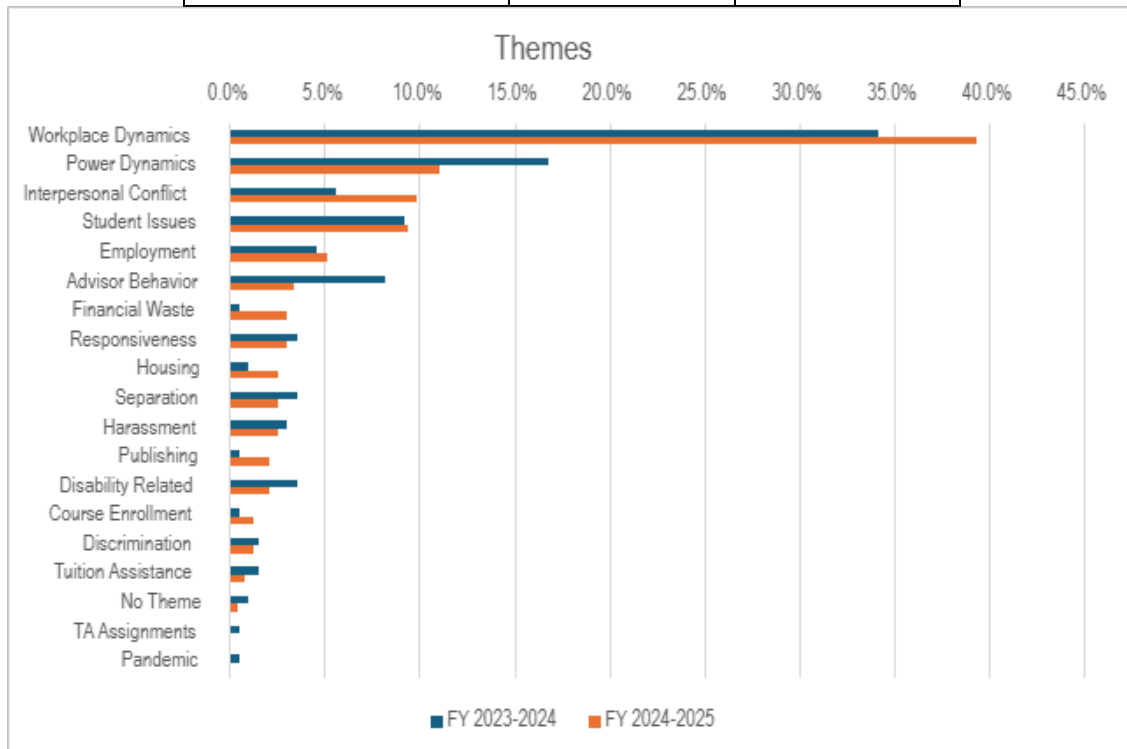
Perceived Risk	FY 2023-2024	FY 2024-2025
Potential for internal/external grievances	61%	63%
Loss of dept. productivity	55%	59%
Negative publicity	29%	27%
Unwarranted attrition/transfer	15%	13%
Significant violations of policy/Code of Conduct	6%	5%
Litigation Potential	9%	5%
Financial loss	5%	4%
High risk safety issue	3%	3%



The “Perceived Risk” data tells a familiar yet evolving story. The two leading areas of perceived risk are “Potential for internal or external Grievances” and “Loss of Departmental Productivity” rose slightly, signaling continued strain in the workplace relationships, structure and systems. It’s also interesting to note that risks tied to litigation/financial loss, and significant policy violations declined, suggesting that more people may be finding constructive, early resolution to conflict before it escalates. These patterns suggest that while tension points persist, the Ombuds role continues to serve as a vital early warning system, helping UC Merced transform potential disruption into dialogue.

Themes

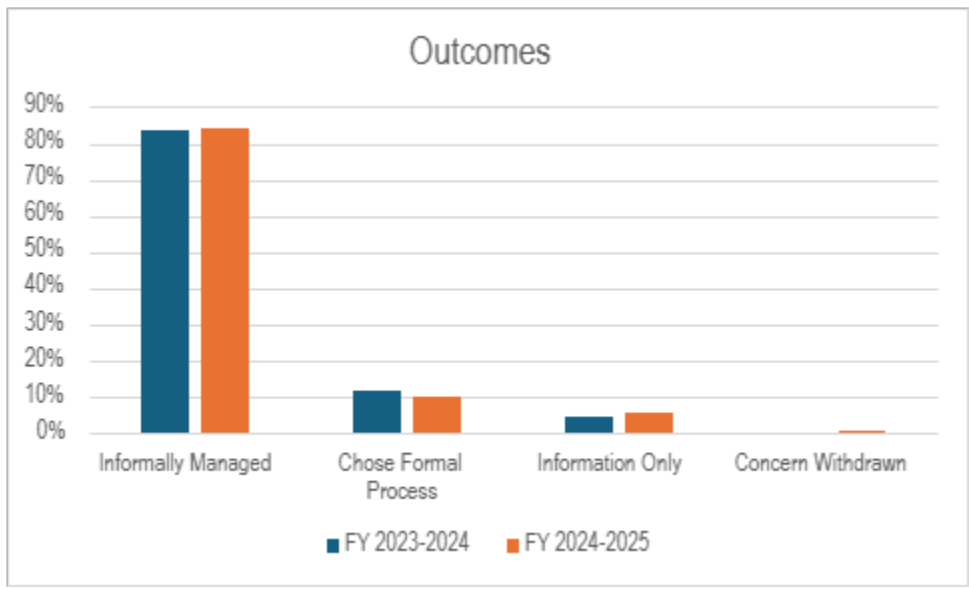
Themes	FY 2023-2024	FY 2024-2025
Workplace Dynamics	34.2%	39.3%
Power Dynamics	16.8%	11.1%
Interpersonal Conflict	5.6%	9.8%
Student Issues	9.2%	9.4%
Employment	4.6%	5.1%
Advisor Behavior	8.2%	3.4%
Financial Waste	0.5%	3.0%
Responsiveness	3.6%	3.0%
Housing	1.0%	2.6%
Separation	3.6%	2.6%
Harassment	3.1%	2.6%
Publishing	0.5%	2.1%
Disability Related	3.6%	2.1%
Course Enrollment	0.5%	1.3%
Discrimination	1.5%	1.3%
Tuition Assistance	1.5%	0.9%
No Theme	1.0%	0.4%
TA Assignments	0.5%	0.0%
Pandemic	0.5%	0.0%



This year’s themes reveal shifting trends in the community’s lived experience. Workplace Dynamics rose sharply, signaling deeper attention to the culture of daily work. Power Dynamics declined, while Interpersonal Conflict nearly doubled, indicating that many concerns still live in the space between people, not just policies. Emerging issues like Financial Waste, Housing, and Publishing hint at a widening landscape of concerns. Altogether, the data reflects a community in motion, reshaping how it names and navigates conflict.

Outcomes

Outcome	FY 2023-2024	FY 2024-2025
Informally Managed	84%	84%
Chose Formal Process	12%	10%
Information Only	5%	5.6%
Concern Withdrawn	0%	0.4%



Observations & Recommendations

This year’s data tells a story that runs deeper than numbers alone. It reflects the quiet undercurrents shaping how people live, work, and experience this campus community. We saw a 17% rise in visitors and a striking increase in complex “red” cases—evidence that more people are carrying weightier and more systemic concerns to the Office of the Ombuds.

Staff engagement grew noticeably, particularly among those in supervisory roles, while faculty participation dipped. This points to expanding trust among staff and an opening to strengthen our connection with other groups. The nature of concerns has also shifted: while interpersonal tensions

remain a familiar thread, more cases are rooted in organizational and mission-level challenges, signaling growing strain at the structural level.

Emotional impact remains profound. Stress, anxiety, and psychological safety concerns surface often—but so does a quiet signal of hope. Nearly 80% of visitors say they intend to stay at UC Merced if their concerns are addressed. This is a powerful reminder that the Office of the Ombuds is more than a place to resolve conflict — it's a lever for retention, trust, and belonging.

Looking forward, we recommend deeper alignment with leadership and wellness partners to address the systemic drivers of conflict before they escalate, and a continued investment in preventive education to strengthen our collective capacity to navigate difficulty early and well. In doing so, UC Merced has an opportunity not only to respond to conflict but to shape a culture where trust is built, dialogue is valued, and people can thrive, especially during difficult times.