



OFFICE OF THE OMBUDSPERSON

Report to the University Community

April 1, 2012 – March 31, 2013

Submitted by:
Duncan McDonald and Sheldon Roth



MESSAGE FROM THE OMBUDSPERSON

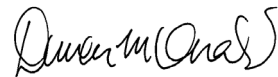
It is a privilege to be the Student Ombudsperson at University of Calgary with its Eyes High goals to become a top five University in Canada. I want to thank Sheldon Roth for helping me into the role and for the excellent job he did as Interim. I am excited to work with the stakeholders in my office; the University, the Student's Union, and the Graduate Students' Association, each with their interest in students and their success.

My goal is to be an effective Ombudsperson by assisting students and the wider community in effective resolution of disputes and management of conflict through effective service and education and inter group collaboration.

I am looking forward to understanding the system that is the University of Calgary and how to become an effective participant in this community.



Duncan McDonald



My role as Interim Ombudsperson provided me with an excellent opportunity to learn more about the variety of issues and concerns that undergraduate and graduate students can encounter during their programs. Although challenging at times, it was also enjoyable and rewarding, and complemented the experiences I have had as a professor at the university.

I would like to thank the Provost for allowing me to act in this position, and the members of the Provost Office for their support.

I am confident that Duncan McDonald will be a very successful Ombudsperson and provide excellent service to students and the university community in general.

Sheldon Roth.





THE OFFICE OF THE UNIVERSITY OF CALGARY OMBUDSPERSON

The Office of the Ombudsperson has been occupied during this term by three different individuals; from May to August, Robert Clegg, the first Ombudsperson at the University of Calgary filled the position; from October, 2012 until April 30, 2013, Sheldon Roth, Professor, Faculty of Medicine, was appointed the Interim Ombudsperson. In February 2013, Duncan McDonald was hired as the permanent Student Ombudsperson for the University of Calgary.

The following report is co-authored by Duncan McDonald and Sheldon Roth.

The office of the Student Ombudsperson was originally located in the Administration Building, room A166, and was relocated in March 2013 to a temporary office in MacKimmie Library tower, MLT210

Website

The website of the Ombuds Office is found at <http://www.ucalgary.ca/provost/students/ombuds>. The website provides description of services and role of the Ombudsperson. In addition there are several links to resources for students

Role of the Ombudsperson

The Ombudsperson is appointed by the Provost on the joint approval of the Deputy Provost, the Student Union Vice president, (Academic) and the Graduate Student's Association Vice president, (Academic).

The role of the Ombudsperson at the University of Calgary was a recent iteration from what was known as the Student Rights Advisor. The position now is jointly funded by the Student Union, Graduate Student Association and the University.

The Ombudsperson carries out responsibilities independent of all students, staff, faculty, administrative bodies and decision making structures of the University, but still remains accountable to all policies and procedures.

The Ombudsperson receives, investigates and seeks to resolve complaints and grievances from students about matters which are under jurisdiction of the University.

The Ombuds Office is a member of the Association of Canadian College and University Ombudspersons; a national body which has its own standards of practice (http://www.uwo.ca/ombuds/accuo_aoucc/english/index.html). In addition, the office follows the model of the International Ombuds Association which uses the following principles:



Confidential

The Ombuds keeps all student information and matters strictly confidential. In short, no one will ever know that the student met with and discussed their issue with the Ombudsperson unless the student requested that the Ombudsperson intervene directly in their matter. Often, individuals find it helpful to explore options and strategies confidentially before embarking on more formal steps. The Ombudsperson is easily accessible as a “confidential shoulder” to vent on, and readily available source of assistance.

Impartial

The Ombudsperson helps resolve problems and complaints within the university. The office is neutral and independent of the university administration. An Ombudsperson can be described as less than an advocate and more as an advisor in an attempt at achieving fairness and due process for those involved. The Ombudsperson is non-judgmental, a source of confidential advice, and welcomes all student questions and concerns.

Informal

The Ombuds Office operates informally and does not duplicate, but adds to existing processes like procedures for the filing of grievances, faculty administrative hearings, or other formal procedures followed by the university at large. The Ombudsperson may explore whether proper procedures were followed and bring to the attention of the university administration gaps and/or inadequacies in existing rules and regulations. The Ombudsperson may attend an appeal, but only as an advisor and not as an advocate. In short, the Ombudsperson insures that the student rights to procedural fairness and due process is respected.

Independent

The Ombudsperson is directly responsible to the President of the university and not to any other administrative office. There is an emphasis to merit the trust others place in the position.

(a) Value of an Ombudsperson.

A recent Doctoral thesis by Dr. Robyn Jacobson points out the value of the Ombuds office in the University setting. Dr. Jacobson interviewed twenty Ombuds officers at Ontario Universities. Jacobson (2012) writes, “Although other venues may exist on campuses where people can obtain information, advice, and even lodge complaints, it is the ombudsperson who ensures that disputes emanating from the actions of the university and its staff are fairly resolved and that conflict is managed or future potential disputes avoided. The ombudsperson on a university campus provides information and advice and coaches individuals on how to resolve their disputes. The ombudsperson focuses on fairness and can investigate complaints regarding incidents of unfairness that are brought to the office and make recommendations for a resolution where the complaint is grounded”. (Robyn Jacobson York University, 2012)



ANNUAL ACTIVITIES OF THE OMBUDS OFFICE.

Sheldon Roth assumed the position of Interim Ombudsperson on October 2nd, 2012. His initial activities included developing a new file system for the Ombuds Office which has proven to be very effective. In addition, Roth instituted a new appointment contact system which has improved the access to the office as well as case management of files. Students are requested to complete an Advising Intake Form found on the Ombuds Office website prior to an appointment. This provides essential information that facilitates the process of assisting the student and also collection of data for reporting. A final improvement was made to the advising intake form as well as the webpage.

Utilizing the revised file system, data was collected for the academic year to generate the following statistics. Note that data from April 2012 to August 2012 were those created by Robert Clegg. Unfortunately data could not be acquired for the month of September. Data for the period October to March 31, 2013 have been generated by Duncan McDonald and Sheldon Roth.



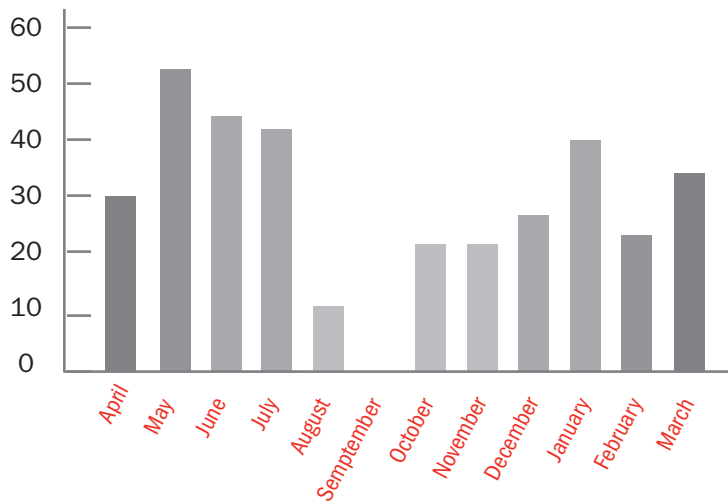
THE YEAR IN REVIEW

Annual Statistics

The data within this report do not reflect a normal year of cases within the office due to a period of approximately 6 weeks when the office was not staffed and therefore accurate data were not available.

The following graphics represent the distribution of students requesting service by the Office of the Ombudsperson based on undergraduate, graduate, international status, type of issue and faculty.

Figure 1 Total Numbers of Cases.

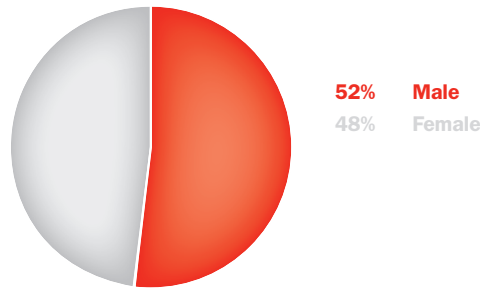


Since the office underwent transitions, service volumes were less than the previous year. The total number of cases for the academic year 2012/2013 was 339. In comparison, the total number of cases for 2011/2012 was 437 which reflected 12 months of data. The data for 2012/2013 reflects approximately 10 months of data. Note that the total number of cases does not reflect repeat visits by students.

For the activity during the year, May seemed to be most active attracting 15% of the total cases, followed by June at 13%, July at 12% and January at 12%.

The Schulich School of Engineering represented 26% of the total number of cases, whereas Arts was 19%, Business 13% and Science 12%.

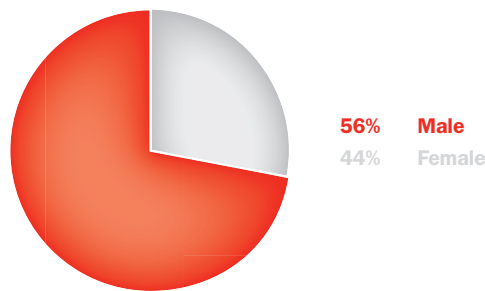
Figure 2 Distribution of Cases by Gender



Of the total number of cases, 163 were females representing 48% and 176 were males representing 52% of the population. This is shown graphically in Figure 2.

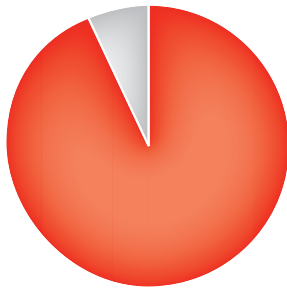
The distribution by gender shows a slight increase in females accessing the office and a slight decrease in males compared to the previous year (2011/2012 -56% male 44% female).

Figure 3 Comparison Between Undergraduate and Graduate Cases.



There were 245 undergraduate cases representing 72% of the total files, and 94 graduate student cases representing 28%. This is shown graphically in Figure 3. These values are similar to the previous academic year (2011/2012 - 75% undergraduate, 25% graduate).

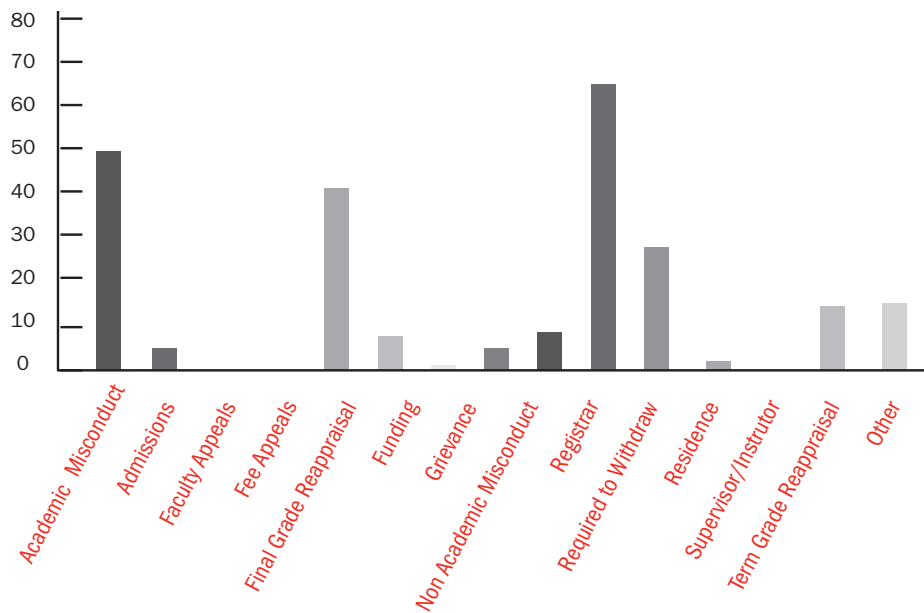
Figure 4 International Students



The ratio between domestic and international students for the current year remains relatively the same as the previous year. For the academic year 2012/2013, there were 314 Domestic (93%) students and 25 (7%) International students compared to 91.5% Domestic and 8.5% International for 2011/2012. These values also reflect the percentage of international students by enrollment. While the University or this office does not measure a third category, there are students who are first generation Canadians by birth who have to integrate the values of the parents country of origin and the Canadian culture. The issues they face often mimic the same issues as the international students which presents these students with a unique challenge often only seen in this office.

Distribution of Undergraduate Students Issues and Faculty.

Figure 5 Undergraduate Student Issues

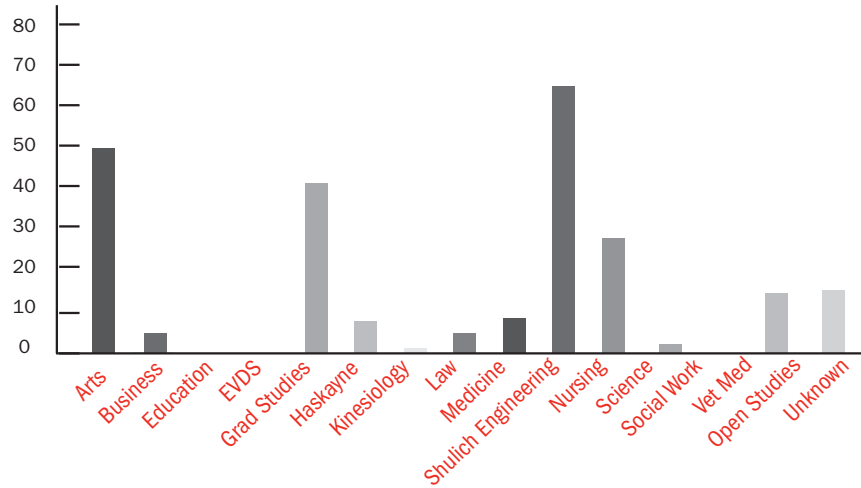


Undergraduate cases represent, by volume, the greatest number of visitors to the Ombuds office. Many of the cases involve advising the student of the processes, and creating options for them to pursue. The Ombudsperson does not advocate for the student, but does advocate for fairness. Many times, a visitor to the office is immersed in a complex process that is not always easily understood. At times, because of the complexity, the issues

might not be handled in a timely manner by the system. In many cases, this can result in outcomes to the students' health, and in particular, their mental health.

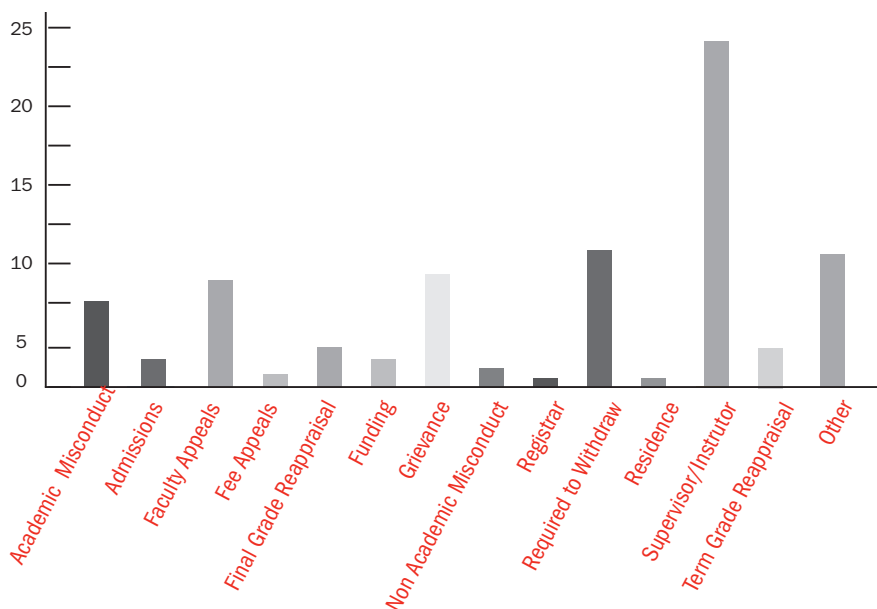
Notes: The most frequent issue recorded was Required to Withdraw at 31%, followed by Term Grade Reappraisal at 11%, Non Academic Misconduct at 10% and Academic Misconduct at 9%. The category Other at 12%, includes miscellaneous issues representing student concerns.

Figure 6 Undergraduate Student Issues by Faculty.



In reviewing the data by Faculty, we noted that the volumes were not always consistent with the size of the Faculty. The analysis revealed that the Schulich School of Engineering accounted for 26% of the undergraduate cases; whereas Arts was 20%, Haskayne 17% and Science 12%.

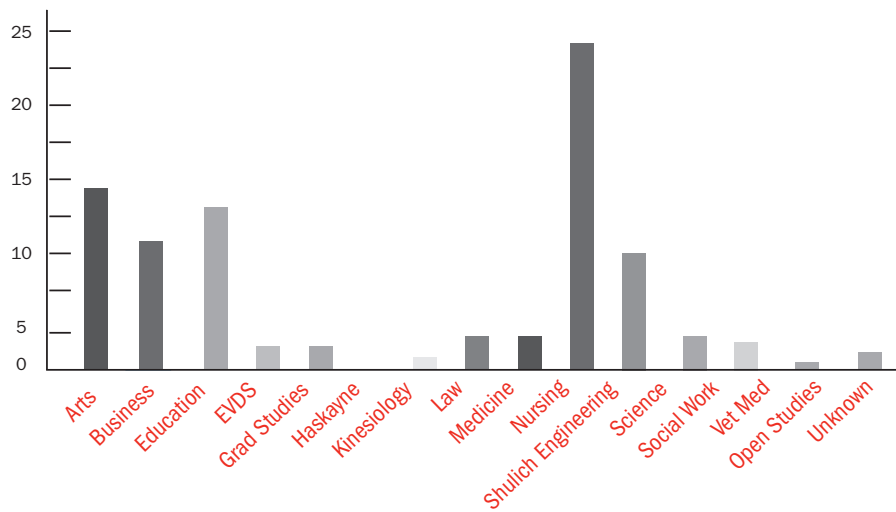
Figure 7 Graduate Student Issues



It was revealed that the most frequent issue for graduate students was Supervisor (25% of total). This was similar to the previous year (2011/2012). The next frequent issue was Required to Withdraw at 12%.

Typically, graduate student visits to the Ombudspersons office are less in volume and more significant in terms of value to the student compared to the undergraduate. Graduate students who are funded or come as International Students find the stakes higher when there is conflict. As noted in previous reports and across University campuses, the greatest issue affecting graduate students is Supervisor/Student relationships. When relationships are progressing well, they can be a source of collaboration, mentoring and learning. When the relationship goes bad it can be a source of frustration, anxiety and distress. For the student, there is a lot at stake in terms of degree completion, research and funding. For all these reasons the visitors at the graduate level often have cases that take far more time and multiple visits.

Figure 8 Graduate Student Issues by Faculty





It was noted that the Faculty with the largest representation was the Schulich School of Engineering at 24%, followed by Arts at 15%, EVDS at 14%, Education 11% and Science at 10%.

Campus Event Participation and Initiatives of the Ombudsperson

- Presentation SES-February 2013
- Presentation – SU Wellness Center – February 2013
- U-Today interview – Article on Office – February 2013
- Gauntlet Interview-March 2013
- GFS Interview webpage-March 2013

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Awareness of the Office—The Ombuds Office at the University of Calgary is rather new, established in 2010. It requires constant promotion and education about its services. While there are many offices that effectively serve students, the role of the Ombudsperson in an organization is unique. Students are better served when they are directed to the office as early as possible with their issue. Traditionally, Ombuds Offices are viewed as an office of “last resort”. Practically they are more effective when students are sent earlier.

RECOMMENDATION: That all student service offices regard the Ombuds office as an effective partner in student services and the Faculty assess students earlier in the process of appeals.



2. Appeals process- From data gathered in the Ombuds office, it is apparent in many cases that the formal appeals process is at times cumbersome and unclear to students. In many cases, relatively simple cases linger for months until they are resolved. One of the tenants of “fairness” is timeliness. If an appeal is not timely, it cannot be fair.

RECOMMENDATION: That there should be a review of the appeals process at the University of Calgary with consideration given to developing a more uniform and timely process of appeals.

3. International Students: The University of Calgary plans to increase the number of international students compared to the current five percent of the population. (<http://metronews.ca/news/calgary/609007/university-of-calgary-aims-to-double-international-student-enrolment-exchange-programs/>) From case files of the Ombuds Office, while not large by volume, the international students represent a significant caseload in terms of challenge and complexity. The issues involving International students center on culture, language and academic expectations. The challenge for an institution is not only to educate but to learn how to integrate the world into the classroom.

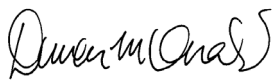
RECOMMENDATION: In accordance with increased enrollment of international students, the University augments resources; including training and support for students and faculty relative to the goals for future growth.

Looking ahead

As the University of Calgary moves towards its EYES HIGH strategy, the Ombuds office looks forward to not only serving the students but to providing education and feedback to the system that will assist the community in managing conflict and resolving disputes in a fair and timely manner.

We want to thank the stakeholders who contribute to the operation of the Ombuds Office; The University of Calgary; the Graduate Students Association and the Student’s Union.

Respectively submitted,



Duncan W. McDonald
Ombudsperson



Sheldon H. Roth
Professor
Interim Ombudsperson

Dated: June 30th, 2013

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