

April 2014 - June 2015

Student Ombuds Office Annual Report

Promoting a fair and just campus community



UNIVERSITY OF
CALGARY

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MESSAGE FROM THE OMBUDS

In presenting this fifth annual report of the Student Ombuds Office, I would like to express my gratitude to the university community for the continued opportunity and privilege to provide an essential service.

The work of an ombuds office relies in great part on the willingness of the members of the university community to engage, question, and resolve. When students visit the ombuds office it is frequently under very stressful and complex circumstances, and the student is often in crisis by that point. The office regularly relies on other campus resources to help support the student, bring clarity to the situation, and help relieve some of the stress the student is experiencing.

Collaboration is an integral component of ensuring students are supported, regardless of the eventual outcome of the situation. I am grateful to the staff, faculty, and administrators who work with the office to help clarify or resolve issues. I would like to thank the Students' Union and Graduate Students' Association for their financial support, advice, and feedback during this reporting period.

Respectfully submitted,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Kevin Wiens". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Kevin Wiens
Student Ombuds
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THE UNIVERSITY OF CALGARY STUDENT OMBUDS OFFICE

The Student Ombuds Office underwent significant changes to help improve the service during this reporting period. These changes include:

- Moving to a permanent location of MB 212 in the MacKimmie Block
- New Ombuds incumbent
- Dissolution of the previous tripartite funding agreement for the office between the university, Graduate Students' Association, and the Students' Union (the office is now solely funded by the university)
- A new reporting structure wherein the Ombuds now reports to the vice-provost (student experience)
- A change in name for the office from the previous identifier 'Office of the Ombudsperson' to 'Student Ombuds Office'
- A revised structure for Student Ombuds Advisory Committee
 - The purpose of the advisory committee is to provide a forum for stakeholders to discuss the Student Ombuds service. The committee will provide advice to the Student Ombuds office to ensure that it continues to meet the needs of students and provide excellent service to the campus community. The seven member committee is comprised of student, staff and faculty representatives

Additional improvements include:

- Improved Communication
The website of the Ombuds office (ucalgary.ca/ombuds) has been updated and provides a description of the role of the office, services provided, and links to helpful resources for students.
- Improved Access
Students are now also able to book appointments online by visiting success.ucalgary.ca and choosing a date and time most convenient for them. They are also still able to email or telephone the office directly to book appointments. The ability of students to make their own appointments has been well received and increases access to the office. Drop-in times continue to be available to ensure those who want to remain completely anonymous can do so.

The Student Ombuds Office is staffed by one ombuds and serves the total university population of more than 30,000 students in undergraduate, graduate, and professional degree programs. The office also serves University of Calgary students enrolled in distance learning programs at Red Deer College, the downtown campus, the Foothills campus, and students at the Qatar campus.

ROLE OF THE STUDENT OMBUDS OFFICE

The Student Ombuds Office at the University of Calgary is a confidential, independent, and impartial resource for all members of the university community on student related questions and issues. The Student Ombuds Office provides students with guidance and advice to understand policies and procedures, strategies and tips for constructively raising and resolving concerns, coaching and guidance to making informed decisions, and providing the appropriate referrals to other campus resources when necessary. Students may access the office at any stage in a problem or dispute.

Some of the main functions of the Student Ombuds Office include:

- Discussion about concerns or complaints
- Explain decision making processes and governance if there is lack of clarity
- Review relevant options available to the student
- Assist in assessing options so the student can make an informed decision on how best to proceed
- Coach students in achieving a resolution to the matter in a respectful and professional way
- Clarify policies and procedures, and explain how to apply them in a given situation
- Review concerns and complaints to identify common trends or patterns
- Where appropriate, promote discussion of university-wide student-related concerns

The student ombuds advocates for fairness and reasonable outcomes in all situations. The student ombuds does not defend or advocate for the student seeking assistance, nor does the position defend the university. In addition, the student ombuds adheres to the standards of practice produced by the Association of Canadian Colleges and University Ombudspersons (ACCUO), which can be viewed at uwo.ca/ombuds/accuo_aoucc/english/SoP.pdf. The student ombuds is a full voting member of ACCUO.



THE YEAR IN REVIEW

From the period of April 1, 2014 to June 30, 2015 there were 420 individual students who contacted the Student Ombuds Office. Going forward this annual report will reflect the period from July 1 to June 30 each year.

The five year trend of individual student contacts is:

	2010-2011	2011-2012	2012-2013	2013-2014	2014-2015
Undergraduate	n/a	330	245	326	323
Graduate	n/a	107	94	64	97
Total	503 ¹	437	339 ²	390	420 ³

1. The breakdown of student visits between undergraduate and graduate was not available for the 2010-2011 reporting period
2. This figure was based on 10 months of data as compared to 12 months of data for each of the previous two reporting periods
3. As the previous four reporting periods were from April 1 to March 31, for equal comparison there were 364 students that contacted the office from April 1, 2014 to March 31, 2015.



A monthly comparison of the reporting period shows the following overall case distribution:

Figure 1. Number of files opened per month

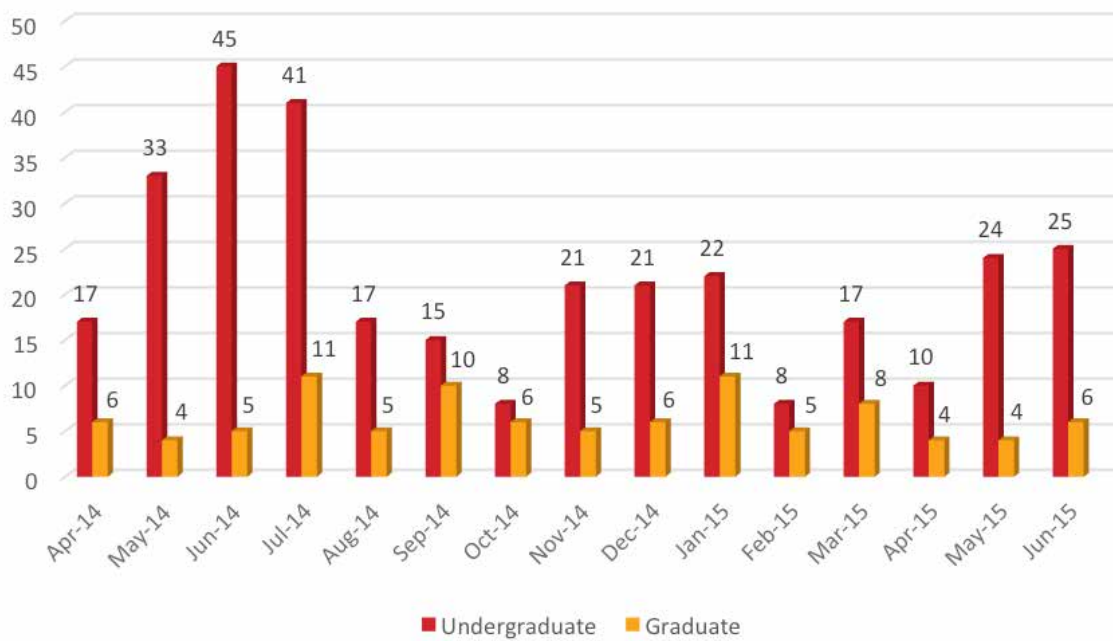
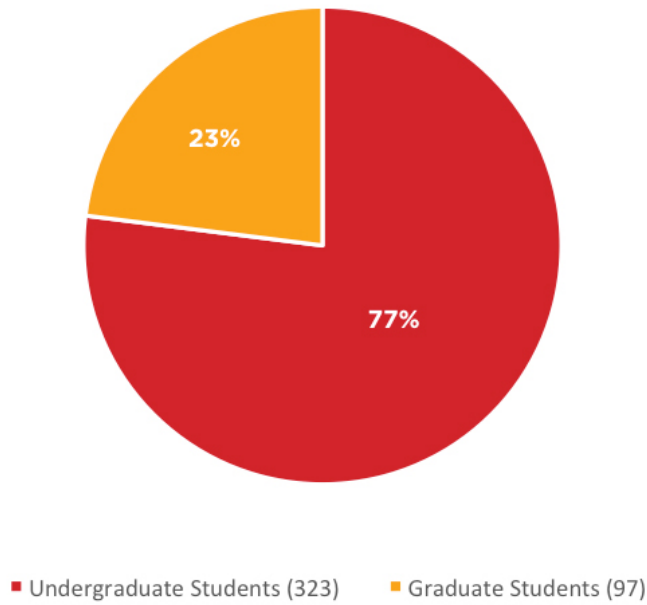


Figure 2. Percentage of Undergraduate and Graduate student consultations with Student Ombuds Office. n=420



Additional details include:

- 60 students identified as international (14% of total caseload)

Students are referred to the office in a variety of ways, which includes:

- Faculty - 55%
- Registrar's Office - 2%
- Student/friend - 11%
- Student Association - 7%
- Student support services - 9%
- Website 16%

Figure 3. Method of initial contact

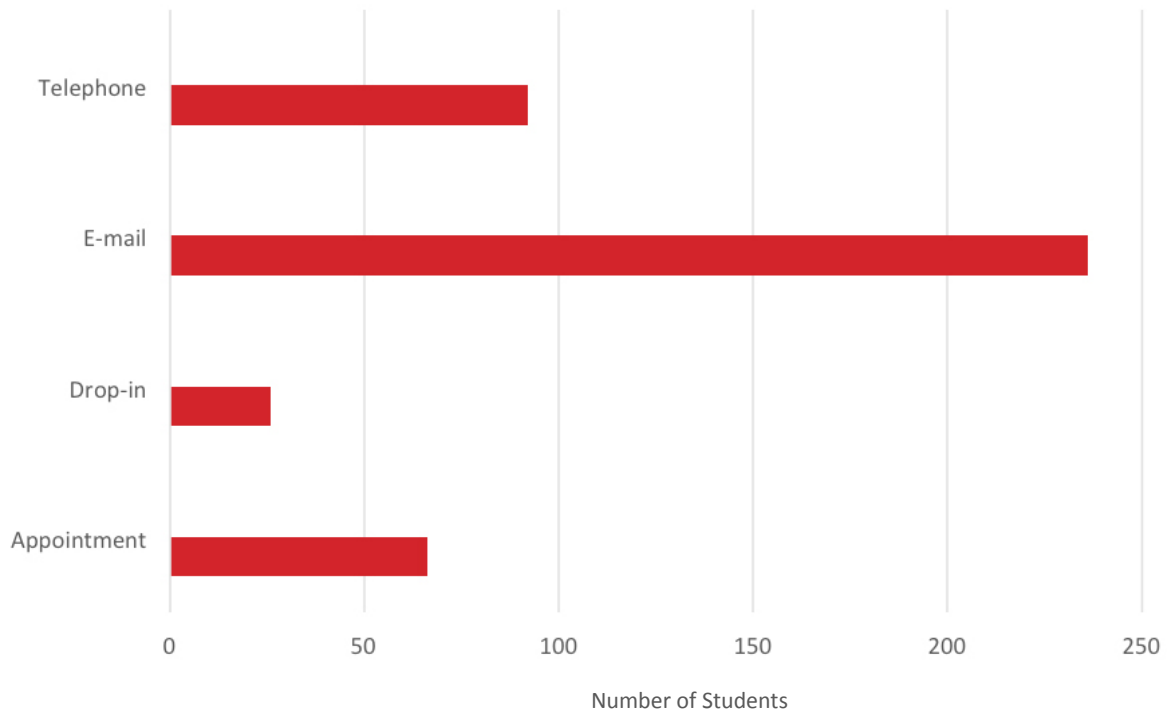
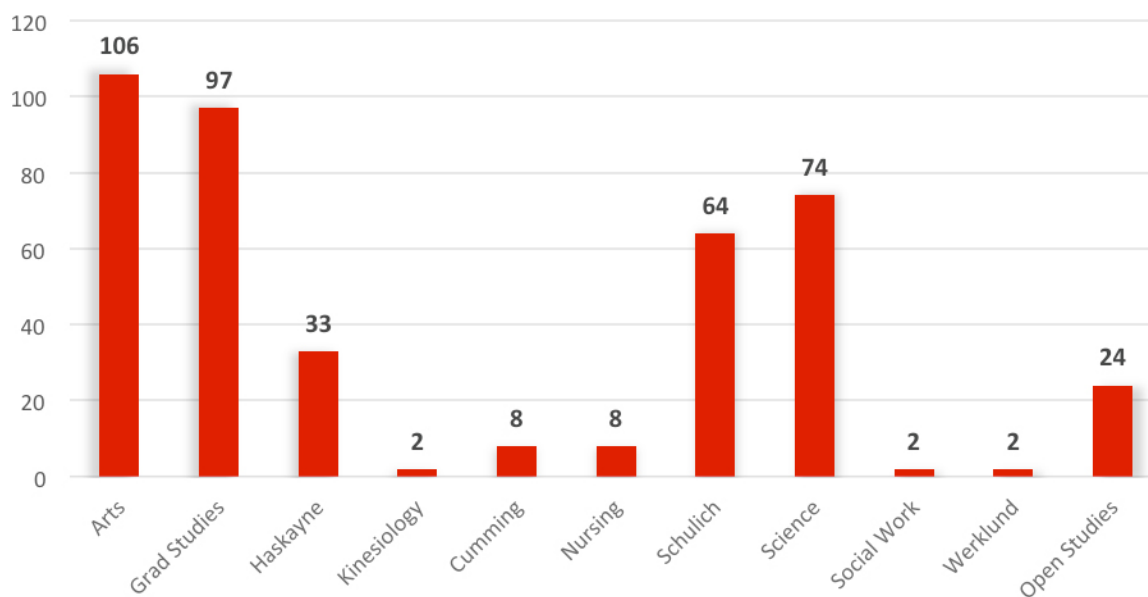


Figure 4. Case distribution by faculty



Note: None of the students that contacted the office that identified as being from the faculties of Environmental Design, Law, Veterinary Medicine, Continuing Education or Qatar.

Table 2 shows the breakdown of the main issues that brought students in to the office for. In some instances, there were clearly more than one presenting issue. As such, the student's issue is reflected in more than one category.

Nature of Issue	Total by nature of issue		
	Undergraduate	Graduate	Total
Reappraisal of Graded Term	19	3	22
Reappraisal of Final Grade	17	8	25
Supervisor Issue(s)	7	62	69
Teaching Assistantship	1	3	4
Required to Withdraw	142	10	152
Health and Safety	5	1	6
Academic Misconduct	25	4	29
Non-academic Misconduct	13	0	13
Grievances	11	8	19
Academic Appeals	184	10	194
Accommodations	3	3	6
Student Rights	12	11	23
Admissions	13	3	16
Readmissions	4	1	5
Registration Appeals	5	0	5
Fee Appeals	5	3	8
Funding/Bursaries	2	2	4
Total	468	132	600



CASE SUMMARIES

There are numerous cases throughout the year involving similar issues, however students experience them in different ways. Each consultation is unique, which means there isn't a formulaic or automatic response that can be provided. Every student receives an individualized approach that's specific to their given situation. The following case summaries represent some of the typical issues and the type of resolutions achieved (any information that could identify the student, faculty, or administrative unit has been removed or changed).

GRADUATE STUDENT SUPERVISION

A graduate student needed help preparing for a meeting with his supervisor, as their relationship had become strained in the past six months. The student was concerned because he needed to have a positive annual review, he was preparing for his candidacy exam, and he needed his supervisor to provide him with research work throughout the coming term. The student felt that all of this was in jeopardy due to the state of the relationship with his supervisor. He did not know how best to proceed, so he contacted the Student Ombuds Office for support.

Outcome: After having an open and honest discussion with the student, a clearer picture emerged about the factors that had strained the relationship, which had then led to further miscommunication and unrealistic expectations from both student and supervisor. Various strategies were discussed with the student including ways to set a positive tone and frame the discussion in an open, collaborative manner to help rebuild communication and create realistic expectations. The student subsequently reported that the meeting was very successful and the open discussion had led to a renewed commitment to his work and a better relationship with his supervisor.

GRADUATE STUDENT SUPERVISION SWITCH

A graduate student was having difficulties with his supervisor, in large part due to miscommunication and what the student felt was a lack of direction and support. The relationship had deteriorated to the point where the student felt his funding from his supervisor was at risk. The student was also concerned that his supervisor was going to recommend to the program director that he be removed from the program due to unsatisfactory performance and lack of progress. The student initially sought support from the Wellness Centre and was subsequently referred to the Student Ombuds Office.

Outcome: The student was engaged in discussing and strategizing some of the different approaches he could take in order to improve the relationship, including having the ombuds potentially mediate a discussion, and initiation of a potential supervisor switch. The student was very fearful of reprisal from his supervisor and instead approached the program to inquire about a voluntary withdraw. The student ombuds was subsequently invited to a meeting with the student, program director, program assistant, coordinator, and department head. All of the available options to support the student were discussed and eventually a solution was agreed upon, which included a change in supervisors. The development of the solution was highly collaborative with a successful outcome.



PLAGIARISM

A fourth-year undergraduate student completing her second-to-last term was accused of plagiarism in a term paper. The student was referred to the Student Ombuds Office from the decision letter sent to her from the faculty. The letter also explained that she was receiving a grade of zero on the paper, and she was being placed on probation for the remainder of her time as a student. The paper was worth 40% of her overall course grade.

Outcome: Upon meeting with the student, she indicated that the allegation was the result of misusing quotation marks and attributing the wrong author to the sentence in question. She had already met with a senior faculty representative to explain the situation and was still assessed the grade and probation penalty afterwards. The student was quite distraught about the effect this would have on her, and she was guided through the steps she could take to appeal the decision. She wrote a letter of appeal, and received guidance and feedback to ensure the letter was concise and factual. She was also provided with coaching to assist her in preparing for the process and this helped relieve a lot of the stress and anxiety she was experiencing. Approximately three weeks after the initial accusation, the student was granted an appeal hearing at the faculty level on the grounds of 'fairness in the procedure used to award the grade' and 'a suggestion of bias in the awarding of the grade.' The student ombuds attended the appeal hearing with the student, which lasted approximately 20 minutes. Later that afternoon the student received a response from the chair of the appeals committee informing her that her appeal was upheld and that her paper had been re-graded and a penalty of two letter grades would be administered due to the errors in APA formatting in her paper. In addition, the student needed to attend a writing workshop and complete an online quiz on plagiarism.



REQUIRED TO WITHDRAW

A third-year undergraduate student received a 'Required to Withdraw' letter after her faculty's annual academic review had been completed. The student had previously achieved above average grades during her first two years and was quite strong academically. Accompanying the letter from her faculty was an information sheet about the Student Ombuds Office, and the support the office can provide to students who are required to withdraw. The student contacted the Student Ombuds Office and indicated that she felt there were sufficient grounds to appeal the ruling.

Outcome: For the previous 16 months, the student had suffered from an illness that had effects which included depression, fatigue, poor concentration, as well as other physical and emotional impacts. Part of the medical support that she was receiving included medication, and it took quite some time to find the correct balance in order to alleviate the symptoms. She suffered academically as a result of this as some of her worst symptoms occurred close to mid-term and final exam periods. She wrote a letter of appeal on the grounds of extenuating circumstances, outlining very clearly the effects suffered and the direct impact the illness had on her studies. The student also discussed how she would be able to achieve success in the future if allowed to continue, as she was finally on the correct dosage of medication. Included in her appeal submission were physician statements. The appeal was upheld and the student was allowed to continue in her program.

These sample cases illustrate the ways in which students can be supported, and the often creative solutions that can be provided to resolve issues. They also highlight that collaboration and having a willingness to allow the student to be heard is crucial. Lastly, these cases demonstrate that there are processes in place to assist students when an incorrect decision has been made, and they also show that alternate outcomes are possible when additional information is able to be provided.




THE YEAR AHEAD

Looking forward, the Student Ombuds Office will build on the success from the previous year and continue to develop awareness among the student body about the office and the services provided. Two priorities include communicating with the campus community about fairness and how decisions are reached, and how fairness can be incorporated into decision-making models.

The Student Ombuds Office welcomes formal and informal feedback on this annual report, as well as about the services provided, to ensure students are receiving the best support and service possible.

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