

# 2010/11

## Office of the Ombudsperson Annual Report

### OMBUDS OFFICES – *Keeping Universities Fair*

This report discusses the activities of the Office of the Ombudsperson for the 2010/11 year: providing statistics on who visited the office, why they visited the office, and how we dealt with their concerns; providing snapshots of the various scenarios we dealt with through the year; and finally providing a view forward – into what the office hopes to tackle during the 2011/12 year.

As I began drafting this report, the Globe and Mail's Annual University Review had just been published. The Review is a survey of more than 33,000 undergraduate students at universities across Canada. Students were asked questions that helped evaluate universities in areas such as Student Satisfaction, Instructors' Teaching Style, and Academic Counselling. As I read the report, I thought to myself, I wonder what students would say if you asked them to comment on how fair their university is. Questions could include:

- Is their university transparent when it comes to communicating policies and procedures to students?
- Do the professors and administrators listen to students when they have a concern about a grade, assignment, or policy?
- Do their professors return assignments and exams promptly?
- Does their administration, including academic counselors, respond to questions within a reasonable timeframe?
- When they appeal a professor's decision, is the Chair or Dean impartial and unbiased? If the Chair or Dean has a conflict of interest do they defer the decision to someone else?

These are the types of questions Ombuds at Western have been asking since the position was created in 1974. For almost four decades, the Ombudsperson has been responding to students who believe they have been treated unfairly, and to administrators and faculty members who want to understand the fairest way of dealing with a situation.

I am honoured to have been hired as the seventh Ombudsperson at Western. After a year as Acting Ombudsperson, I was hired full time in September 2011. Like my two immediate predecessors, Frances Bauer and Adrienne Clarke, I am looking forward to not only responding to questions and investigating situations when warranted, but also to educating student and academic leaders on what is fair, and how to deal with issues when they arise.

But enough about the future, the purpose of an annual report is to highlight the past year. In the case of this report, that is the period from August 1, 2010 to July 31, 2011. As you will read, the number of individuals who sought advice from us increased from 366 in 2009/10 to 422 in 2010/11. Assistant Ombudsperson Anita Pouliot and I worked tirelessly last year getting the word out to students and administrators alike. In the Fall we hosted an open house for students, faculty and administrators; we had a booth at International Student Orientation and Graduate Student Orientation; I spoke at the Affiliated Colleges and presented to residence staff; we distributed pens, pamphlets and posters far and wide; and in preparation for a new cohort of students, we sponsored the information bags distributed at Student Academic Orientation in the Summer of 2011. A highlight of my year was participating in Alternative Spring Break as a staff leader on the Dominican Republic experience. In addition to being a wonderful personal service learning opportunity, it allowed me to see into a university program and to meet some truly happy and successful university students. It gave me ideas for guiding the student who is looking for ways to extend their university experience beyond the classroom.

Also in 2011, both Anita and I attended conferences hosted by the Association of Canadian College and University Ombudspersons and the Forum of Canadian Ombudsmen as well as various other courses. The confidential nature of our work means that we cannot survey campus for input or discuss issues with a colleague. This makes conference participation and networking with other Ombuds critical. We are lucky at Western in that our advisory committees have

always recognized the importance of training and ensure that we have an appropriate training budget.

The 2010/11 year would not have gone as smoothly without the work of Assistant Ombudsperson, Anita Pouliot. I am the third Ombudsperson with whom Anita has worked. For over twenty years she has provided continuity between Ombuds and sound advice to students. I also want to thank our Advisory Committee members for their help and support through the year: Carlos Canas (Affiliate Student Representative), Scott Kerr (USC President's Representative), Duncan Sutherland (Graduate Student Representative), Dr Allen Pearson (UWO President's Representative), Professor Susanne Kohalmi (Senate Representative), and Professor Barbara Decker Pierce (Affiliate Staff and Faculty Representative). Finally, I want to thank everyone who has contacted the office, or whom we have contacted for assistance in helping the university meet its fairness goal.

I hope you enjoy reading this report and encourage you to contact the Office of the Ombudsperson if you have concerns about fairness at Western.

Jennifer Meister  
Ombudsperson

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# The Numbers

This section provides a statistical breakdown of the office's caseload. It answers the frequently-asked questions of:

*Who* visits the office?

*Why* do students visit the office?

*What* kind of help can we provide?

*Who* else visits the office?

*How* can students contact us?

*Who* visits the office?

Between August 1, 2010 and July 31, 2011, 421 students visited the Office of the Ombudsperson. This was up from 366 in 2009-10 but down from 438 in 2008-09. The breakdown of the faculties students came from, and a comparison to the previous two years, is below. Please note that the constituency of the student isn't necessarily the location of the issue:

## Undergraduate Students

Faculty	2010/11	2009/10	2008/2009
Undergraduate faculty not identified by student	113	97	105
Social Science	73	65	75
Science	37	39	53
King's	33	12	22
Arts	26	19	10
Bachelor of Health Sciences	23	Less than 10	Less than 10
FIMS	16	Less than 10	Less than 10
Huron College	13	14	Less than 10
Engineering	12	12	22
Brescia	11	Less than 10	Less than 10

All other Faculties, School and Affiliated University Colleges had fewer than 10 students who used the office during the 2010/11 year.

## Graduate Students

Faculty	2010/11	2009/10	2008/09
Master's FIMS	9	5	6
Master's Engineering	6	4	Less than 3
Master's faculty not identified by student	5	4	14
Master's Health Sciences	4	13	5
Master's Education	4	Less than 3	Less than 3
PhD Science	4	8	5
PhD Social Science	4	3	Less than 3
PhD Arts	4	5	Less than 3
PhD Engineering	3	8	3
PhD faculty not identified by student	3	4	7
Master's Social Science	3	3	Less than 3
Master's Ivey (MBA)	3	Less than 3	Less than 3

All other Graduate programs had fewer than three students who used the office.

## Why do students visit the office?


Students come to the Office of the Ombudsperson with a variety of complaints and inquiries. Perhaps they want to know how to appeal a grade or perhaps they need advice on their application for readmission.

### Top Ten Concerns – Undergraduate

Concern	2010/11	2009/10	2008/09
Grade issues	63	52	68
Required to withdraw	43	35	47
Other Academic	31	18	14
Other UWO	31	11	Less than 10
Readmission	27	30	28
Course Management	27	15	20
Program Requirements	23	13	Less than 10
Appeal Exams	21	27	24
Appeal Other	20	17	24
Registration/Add Drop	11	10	20

### Top Concerns – Graduate

Concern	2010/11	2009/10	2008/09
Other Academic	13	12	8
Supervision	9	28	14
Progression	8	7	14
Funding	7	7	Less than 3
Grades	7	3	Less than 3
Scholastic Offense	3	5	Less than 3



## What kind of help can we provide?

The Office of the Ombudsperson categorizes cases by type: Information, Advice, and Intervention.

The *Information* category normally includes short consultations which involve providing students with information about a university policy or procedure and/or referring them to another campus service or resource.

The *Advice* category normally includes more lengthy consultations that involve one or more of the following: helping

a student to understand a decision, identifying options for resolution, explaining the steps of the appeal process, providing feedback on letters of appeal, and coaching a student about how to effectively approach a particular situation.

An *Intervention* from the Office of the Ombudsperson only occurs with a student's permission. Interventions often take the form of information gathering, mediation, facilitating communication between students and departments, shuttle diplomacy and case reviews.

Action type	2010/11	2009-10	2008-09
Advice	267	249	270
Information	156	99	137
Intervention	47	25	31

## Who else visits the office?

As mentioned earlier in this report, the Office of the Ombudsperson isn't just here for students. We also respond to inquiries from faculty, students' family members, and members of the London Community who have questions about a policy or practice at Western. Each year, at least 60% of non-student contacts relate to student issues such as equity issues, grades, and general concerns about Western services.

Client Identity	2010/11	2009-10	2008-09
Family member of student or applicant	25	33	24
Other	12	14	20
Staff	11	9	13
Faculty member	6	12	19

## How can students contact us?

It's easy to contact the Office of the Ombudsperson. You can phone us, e-mail us, or drop by our office in the Western Student Services Building. When you first contact us, we will have you complete an intake sheet. This is strictly for tracking purposes so that we can produce documents like this report and can better understand what issues need our attention. There is no need to disclose your name and no one outside the Office of the Ombudsperson can access individual records without that individual's permission.

*Sometimes an issue can be solved over the phone or through email, however we will often set up a meeting with you to discuss an issue.*

Initial Contact	2010/11	2009-10	2008-09
Email	194	149	163
Phone	133	131	88
Drop-In	90	78	144



# A Look Inside the Issues

I began this report by wondering what students would say if they were asked questions regarding the fairness of the University. I posed some possible questions about transparency, students' right to be heard, timeliness, and impartiality. The following summaries provide a snapshot of issues that we dealt with from August 2010 to July 2011, many which test the basic tenants of fairness listed above. All identifying details have been changed or omitted in the scenarios to protect the privacy of those involved.

## Required to Withdraw

– When is it fair to deny an appeal?

Forty-three students visited us this reporting period after being required to withdraw. Some students wanted to understand the appeal process; others wanted advice on what to do during their year off to maximize their chances of being readmitted. A few students felt they had a compelling case and needed to ensure they communicated their situation accurately.

One such student was in her third year. She finished first year in good standing but in second year began having personal problems that affected her school work and was put on academic probation. She went home the summer between second and third year and met with a counsellor twice a month. Confident that her problems were behind her and that she could do well, she returned to Western in September of 2010. However, once back in London her problems resurfaced and her marks spiraled. She was required to withdraw.

The student had begun an intersession course prior to receiving notification of being required to withdraw, meaning she could continue that course. She got 78% in the course and felt she had found a program she could succeed in and relate to. In fact, the professor in the course was disappointed to hear she was not going to be at the University in the coming year.

The student visited the Office of the Ombudsperson confident that

her appeal would be successful if the Associate Dean understood the reasons she did poorly and knew about the success she had in the intersession course. However, her appeal was denied. The Associate Dean said that although the student should be commended for her intersession mark, they believed she needed a year away from Western to resolve her personal issues. The student did not feel the Associate Dean should be able to tell her what she needed to get back on the right track. The student appealed to the Senate Review Board Academic (SRBA) but the SRBA upheld the Associate Dean's decision.

Unfortunately, this type of situation is common and is upsetting to students. They feel that it is not up to the Associate Dean to decide what is best for them. However, given the information the Associate Dean had in this case, there was nothing to say that the student would be able to cope with a full or even partial course load. The Associate Dean felt that the stress involved in taking one credit during intersession was very different than taking four credits over the year. They wanted the student to take the time to rectify their issues.

In this case, the Office of the Ombudsperson advised the student on the process, reviewed appeal letters, met with the student to discuss next steps once the SRBA had made a decision and, with the student's permission, discussed the situation with the Faculty.

## Scholastic Offense

– What is a fair punishment?

The University of Western Ontario is one of few universities in Ontario without a central Academic Integrity Office, instead individual academic departments enforce the University's Policy on Scholastic Discipline. Often, the Office of the Ombudsperson provides information and advice to both students and faculty regarding academic integrity policies and procedures.

One of the most common things we hear is that the punishment doesn't fit the crime. Students often say that they did not intend to plagiarize – they just forgot to put quotes around the sentence or reference a source. In such cases, students believe an F in the

course or a zero on an assignment is too severe, especially if it is their first offense.

Between now and September 2012, I will be developing a campaign to help educate students about academic integrity -- including what constitutes a scholastic offense and preventative measures to ensure students are using another's words in an acceptable manner. I will also be working with other offices at the University to develop programs that educate Faculty members on how to develop exams and assignments that discourage scholastic offenses.



# WE'RE MOVING

As of mid-February 2012  
we will be down the  
hall from our current office in  
**Room 3135 Western Student Services Building**



## About the *Office of the Ombudsperson*

The Office of the Ombudsperson is jointly funded by the University and the University Students' Council. The Ombudsperson reports to no individual on campus, but to an advisory committee made up of students and staff/faculty. These factors combine to ensure that the Office of the Ombudsperson remains impartial and independent. Another essential feature of the office is confidentiality. We don't divulge names or identifying details without an individual's permission.

The functions of the Office of the Ombudsperson are outlined in the Memorandum of Agreement between the University of Western Ontario and the University Students' Council. They are:

- a) To carry out impartial investigations of complaints or grievances about any aspect of university life at the request of any student, or upon the Ombudsperson's own motion. Before undertaking an investigation, the Ombudsperson will ensure that other avenues have been exhausted. The office may offer advisory support at any stage, to assist a person to resolve a problem by him or herself, and to avoid more formal procedures (such as appeals to the Senate Review Board Academic).
- b) To serve as a general information centre for students and other members of the university community about university resources, procedures, policies, practices and rules. The office will advise students of their rights and responsibilities in university situations. The Ombudsperson is expected to search actively for the answers to any pertinent questions.
- c) To make recommendations to those in authority with a view to remedying unfairness in the situation of an individual student, as appropriate.
- d) To recommend to those in authority, changes in rules or procedures which would have the effect of making the university, the USC or any other signatory fairer in its operations.

**Remember,**  
students help fund  
the Office of the  
Ombudsperson, so use it.  
We do not advocate for  
students, or the university,  
but rather for fairness.  
Sometimes just explaining  
why a professor's  
decision is fair and  
according to university  
policy is all you need to  
put a situation behind you.  
However, sometimes the  
university is being unfair  
– and we can help you  
remedy the situation.



**Open to all students.** Confidential, impartial advice and information about University policies and procedures. This office serves graduate and undergraduate students.

**Western Student Services Building, Room 3135**  
**519-661-3573 • [ombuds@uwo.ca](mailto:ombuds@uwo.ca) • [www.uwo.ca/ombuds](http://www.uwo.ca/ombuds)**

**Office of the  
Ombudsperson**