

Office of the Ombudsperson

Annual Report 2012-13



Confidential Impartial
Independent



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and the University Students' Council

We're all in this Together

It is my pleasure to present my fourth annual report since becoming Ombudsperson in August 2010, and the Office's thirtieth. The objective of this report is to provide a statistical summary of the Office's caseload as well as an outline of the issues we are seeing.

Associate Ombudsperson, Anita Pouliot, and I saw 524 individuals between August 1, 2012 and July 31, 2013.

These individuals came to our office with a total of 569 issues. This is an increase from the 496 students

we saw regarding 538 issues during the previous year. Since I began in this role, the number of visitors to our office has increased from 366 to 524. However in the late 1990s and early 2000s, it was not uncommon for the Office to have over 650 visitors. It's likely that the decrease in visitors since that time is due to the increased use of technology. Most policies and forms are now accessible with the click of a button and many issues are now solved by emailing the individual responsible. There is less need for the Ombudsperson to be involved. A complete statistical breakdown begins on page four.

I would also like to assume that the good work of past Ombuds took care of some of the issues. For example, in 2004, discussions between Frances Bauer (Ombudsperson 1988 to 2006) and Equity and Human Rights Services led to a more formalized policy on accommodating students for religious holidays (Office of the Ombudsperson Annual Report 2003-2004, p. 6). In 2007, Adrienne Clarke (Ombudsperson 2006 to 2010) recommended that students who submit the same paper for credit in two classes should only be penalized in the second class, not both (Office of the Ombudsperson Annual Report 2006-2007, p.12).

In preparing my report each year, I look back to see what was said in past years. This year I was struck by the consistency in issues from year-to-year and even decade-to-decade. I have made these 'repeat offenders' the focus of my report this year. I hope that by drawing attention to these issues we will think seriously about long-lasting solutions. Discussion of these issues begins on page two.

If you only take one thing away from this report, I hope it is a pretty simple message: We're all in this together! Faculty, administrators, students, staff – we're all contributors to student success.

If you only take one thing away from this report, I hope it is a pretty simple message: We're all in this together! Faculty, administrators, students, staff – we're all contributors to student success. Students: that sometimes means staff in the Office of the Ombudsperson have to explain why a professor's decision was the right decision. Faculty, staff and administrators: that means we're sometimes going to contact you with questions to clarify a situation raised by a student. The Office of the

Ombudsperson isn't an official office of complaint for the University. In fact, we don't take complaints. We listen to an issue and will contact the applicable University department if appropriate. We'll listen to both sides of the story and try to come up with a solution that works for everyone – the student and the institution. This is what everyone in the Western community should be doing, and for the most part is what we are doing. We all have a responsibility in

making the Western experience a great one.

On that note, I'll leave you to read the Office of the Ombudsperson Annual Report for the 2012-13 school year. Associate Ombudsperson Anita Pouliot and I greatly enjoyed meeting students and working with administrators last year. We thank you all for your contributions to making Western a fair place to learn.

Jennifer Meister
Ombudsperson, Western University

Did you know?

The Office of the Ombudsperson is a member of the Association of Canadian College and University Ombudspersons (ACCUO) and as such abides by their Standards of Practice.

The Office is also a member of the Forum of Canadian Ombudsman (FCO).

Outreach

My education and professional background is in Marketing Communications and I greatly enjoy putting my skills to use promoting the office. In 2012-13 we participated in the following events:

Summer and Fall 2012

Faculty Orientation - Presentation on Scholastic Offense Policy with John Hatch, Associate Dean of Arts and Humanities, and booth at lunch-time resource fair

Residence Life Tradeshow – booth

Participation in YouTube video created by Residence Life

Graduate Student Orientation – booth

Scholars Elective events – attendance and brochures

Conflict Resolution Workshop at Huron University College

Winter and Spring 2013

SAO Rewind – assistance with answering student questions

Brescia, Huron and King's University Colleges – one-day staffed displays

Sponsorship of draw prize for students completing an academic integrity survey conducted by Western Libraries

Mature Student Orientation – information presentation

University Students' Council (USC) Student Appeals Committee – training on appeal policies and processes



The Issues

As I said in my introduction, I was struck by how closely issues during 2012-13 aligned with past concerns. No solution is ever 'simple' but I hope some of the suggestions I make below will start a discussion about how we can alleviate some of these concerns.

Reducing Access to Courses in Limited Enrollment Programs

In 1982, Jay Haland (Ombudsperson 1977 to 1982) highlighted issues around increased competition for limited enrolment programs (Office of the Ombudsperson Annual Report 1982, p. 1). During the Spring and Summer of 2013, it was not uncommon to see current Western students in our office concerned with admission into high-demand programs such as Health Studies. The students had shadowed a program for most of their time at Western and had most of the necessary credits, but because of enrollment caps, were not being admitted.

The University must stop doing students a favour by giving them permission to take courses in limited enrollment programs into which they stand little chance of ever being accepted. It is very frustrating for students to apply to a program every year during intent to register and

to be declined acceptance every year, yet to continuously receive special permission to take the majority of courses in the module.

One student who came to see us had received special permission to take courses in a particular program yet was never accepted into it. When the student approached us they had six courses (or three credits) left to take, and yet had not been accepted into the module. The program involved is aware of the issue and is still considering the student's options, but in my opinion it would have been fairer to the student to not 'string them along' by continuously granting them special permission.

Unreasonable Delays

In her 1990-1991 annual report, Frances Bauer spoke of Unreasonable Delays (Office of the Ombudsperson Annual Report 1990-1991, p. 3). Likewise, in 2007-2008, Adrienne Clarke discussed the need for clearer timelines for decision-making (Office of the Ombudsperson Annual Report, 2007-2008, p. 3). University appeal policies have strict deadlines for students, but only guidelines for administrators.

In 2012-2013, there were numerous delays as decision makers investigated complex cases. I urge administrators to apply the same timelines to themselves as they do to students. The policy on Graduate Student Academic Appeals states that: "The designated decision maker shall issue a written decision ("program decision"), normally within 3 weeks of the receipt of the appeal." (Academic Handbook, Appeals, Graduate Student Appeals, 18 February 2011) However, there is no such clause in the policy on Undergraduate Student Academic Appeals.

We need to establish a level playing field. As Clarke said, "from a fairness perspective such delays are unreasonable. Administrative fairness requires that students be given a timeline for decision-making, and in the event that a delay is unavoidable the student should be informed of the reason for the delay and given a new timeline for decision-making." (Clarke, A. Office of the Ombudsperson Annual Report 2007-2008, p. 3)

When Migraines Affect your Studies

In 2004-2005, Frances Bauer recommended that "Services for Students with Disabilities be promoted differently, or renamed, to make it clear that it also serves students with chronic medical conditions, many of whom do not think of themselves as having a disability and thus fail to (take advantage) of this service." (Bauer, F. (December 2005). Office of the Ombudsperson Annual Report 2004-2005, p. 7.)

I am in favour of the spirit of this recommendation and believe the University administration needs to look at ways of providing accommodation to students with chronic medical conditions such as migraines or chronic pain. One way would be to increase the number of staff in Services for Students with Disabilities so that they could cater to students with chronic illnesses. Services for Students with Disabilities are the experts in accommodating students and balancing the academic requirements of the University and health needs of the student. This would not only help the student, but also the academic counselors who are often the people these students turn to when their illness flares up and they must miss class or an exam.

Three times in 2012-2013, we had students with chronic illnesses that impacted their exams, and the students did not know what to do. They thought if they did not write their exams they would fail their courses, but they were not well enough to visit the doctor, obtain a medical note, and then stand in line at academic counseling. In one case, the student was not aware that if they chose to write an exam while ill, they stood little chance of a successful grade appeal. The student wrote two exams while suffering from symptoms of their illness and ended up performing poorly. The student approached their academic counselor asking what they could do. The counselor said there was nothing that could be done because they chose to write the exams. If the student had registered with SSD they would be more aware of the policies. SSD would also have documentation on their

illness which would provide additional support for their request for a make-up exam.

SSD is also well equipped to help students deal with the stress that often causes illnesses to flare up.

Related to this is the requirement for students with chronic illnesses to have medical notes signed each time they miss a required academic activity. For a student with a chronic illness such as severe migraines, this could mean multiple trips to the doctor per month and at \$20 per medical note, a hefty cost. It would be much more effective for such a student to register with SSD and for SSD to notify the student's home faculty that a student has a chronic illness which might entail missing class. Then, when the student missed class, all they would have to do is notify their professor and academic counselor. Of course, there could be a threshold so that this wasn't abused. For example, students might be able to take advantage of this three times a term before they had to present a medical certificate to their academic counselor.

Did you know?

The Office of the Ombudsperson is equally funded by the University and the students. All undergraduate students pay \$3.09 per year for our office's services. This includes students on main campus and at Brescia, Huron and King's. All graduate students, except for those in the MBA program, pay \$1.03 per term (for a total of \$3.09 per year). Our joint funding arrangement ensures that the Office of the Ombudsperson is impartial. We are not an advocate for students – or the institution, we are an advocate for fairness.

The Numbers

The Office of the Ombudsperson maintains a confidential database of visitors. It helps us track issues and identify trends. In preparing the annual report, we go through the data to see if there are situations we need to be aware of and bring problems to the attention of University administrators.

Where Visitors Come From

This data helps the Office with our Marketing efforts. It does not indicate that the students visiting our office from a specific faculty had an issue with that faculty. That data is located in the table “Where the Issue Is” on page five. If a faculty is not listed, it is because we had fewer than 10 students visit us from that Faculty or Affiliate University College.

Undergraduate

| Faculty | Number of Students |
|-----------------------------|--------------------|
| Social Science | 93 |
| Science | 86 |
| Bachelor of Health Sciences | 34 |
| Arts | 30 |
| King's University College | 26 |
| Engineering | 23 |
| Huron | 23 |
| FIMS | 18 |
| Health Sciences (Nursing) | 16 |
| Brescia University College | 12 |
| Ivey | 10 |
| Undergraduate unknown* | 89 |

*Students sometimes come to us with a question but don't identify what faculty they are from. Unless it is important for their issue, we won't ask them.

Graduate*

| Faculty of Study | Number of Students |
|------------------|--------------------|
| FIMS | 14 |
| Science | 14 |
| Health Science | 12 |
| Engineering | 7 |
| Social Science | 5 |

*Please note that these numbers include both Master's and PhD students.

Non-Students

At times we have non-students approach us with questions. These include questions from faculty, administrators and staff regarding a policy or a scenario; parents regarding an issue their student is facing; or even members of the public. With regard to parents, we never speak to them regarding specifics unless we have their student's permission. However, we are happy to shed some light on the policies at the University. We encourage them to have their student contact us directly.

Outside of these reported interactions with faculty and staff, we also have regular meetings with some faculties. For example, we have quarterly meetings with the Vice Provost and Associate Vice Provosts of the School of Graduate and Post Doctoral Studies so that we can all keep abreast of the hot issues. Likewise, we have wonderful relationships with some of the academic counselors and associate deans at main campus and the affiliates and often call each other to determine the best next steps for a student – of course, with the student's permission.

| Group | Number of individuals |
|--|-----------------------|
| Family member of student/applicant | 27 |
| University Administrators and Staff (inc deans, chairs, and academic counselors) | 14 |
| Other (could be a neighbor of a student house, a student from another university asking a question, or a member of the public looking for information about Ombudsman Ontario) | 13 |
| Individual faculty member (not a chair or associate dean) | 3 |

Where the Issue Is

This is the information that helps us identify trends in an area. Any administrator wishing to delve further into this information is welcome to contact us. If a faculty is not listed, it is because there were five or fewer students who approached us with issues from that Faculty or Affiliate College.

Undergraduate (Including Continuing Studies and professional programs such as Education and Law)

| Program | Number of students raising issues |
|-------------------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| Social Science | 80 |
| Science | 76 |
| King's University College | 27 |
| Health Science (Bachelor) | 25 |
| Arts and Humanities | 23 |
| FIMS | 19 |
| Engineering | 17 |
| Huron University College | 16 |
| Health Science (Nursing) | 15 |
| Ivey (HBA and pre-Business courses) | 11 |
| Brescia University College | 9 |
| Health Science (Kinesiology) | 7 |
| Education | 6 |
| Undergraduate unknown | 29 |

Graduate (Master's and PhD)

| Program | Number of students raising issues |
|----------------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| FIMS | 12 |
| Health Science (all disciplines) | 10 |
| Engineering | 8 |
| Science | 6 |
| Social Science | 5 |

What the Problem is

Students may come to us with any problem to do with academic or non-academic issues. This section is divided into issues involving undergraduate academics, graduate academics and non-academic issues.

Undergraduate Issues

| Issue | Number of students presenting that issue |
|---|--|
| Grade issues | 77 |
| Appeal exams | 45 |
| Required to Withdraw | 45 |
| Scholastic Offence | 36 |
| Program requirements (This is where we would put students who have not been admitted into a specific program, even after being granted special permission to take a class.) | 34 |
| Readmission | 32 |
| Course management | 23 |
| Fees, financial aid or scholarship issues | 21 |
| Admission | 11 |
| Appeal late withdrawal | 10 |
| Add/Drop | 10 |
| Course requirements | 3 |
| Other academic | 40 |
| Appeal other | 26 |

Graduate Issues

| Issue | Number of students presenting that issue |
|--------------------------------------|--|
| Progression | 14 |
| Supervision | 12 |
| Funding and financial issues | 7 |
| Admit/readmit | 5 |
| Scholastic offence | 3 |
| Grades | 2 |
| Other academic | 12 |
| Other (This would include TA issues) | 54 |

Non-Academic Issues

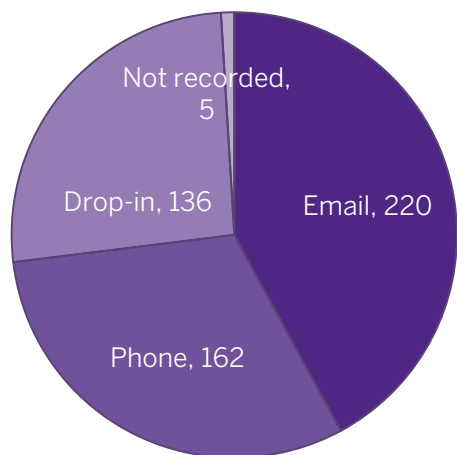
| Issue | Number of students presenting that issue (either graduate or undergraduate) |
|--|---|
| Code of Conduct (non-residence) | 12 |
| External issues (e.g. OSAP, landlord/tenant that we refer) | 12 |
| Student Associations (inc. Clubs issues) | 10 |
| Parking | 9 |
| Referred to Equity | 8 |
| Residence discipline | 7 |
| UWO job related (not including TAs or residence staff) | 7 |
| Residence other (e.g. placement, roommate issues, residence student staff) | 6 |

Why Did Non-Students Contact Us?

People are often surprised when we say that non-students contact us. Here are the issues we hear about from faculty, staff, family members, and other non-students.

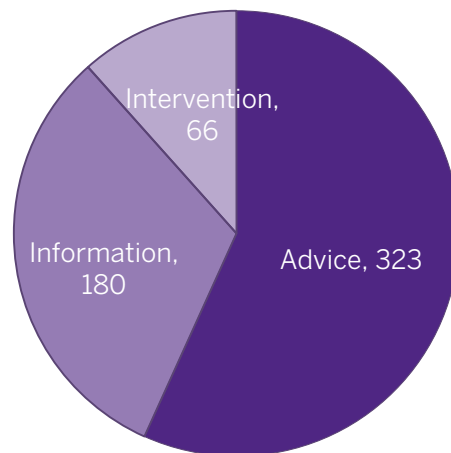
| Issue | Number of people raising the issue |
|--|------------------------------------|
| Scholastic offences | 7 |
| Grade issues | 4 |
| Residence | 4 |
| Student Code of Conduct | 4 |
| Western job related | 3 |
| Required to withdraw | 3 |
| UG fees, financial aid and scholarships | 3 |
| UG course management | 2 |
| Grad admit or readmit | 1 |
| Residence discipline | 1 |
| UG admission | 1 |
| UG appeal late withdrawal | 1 |
| Equity | 1 |
| UG program requirements | 1 |
| UG add/drop | 1 |
| Off-campus residence | 1 |
| Legal | 1 |
| Other academic issues (grad and undergrad) | 5 |
| Other Western issues | 13 |

How Did People Contact Us?



How Did we Deal with the Situation?

The Office of the Ombudsperson has three categories in which we divide how we address a situation: Advice, Information and Intervention.



Advice is our most common form of assisting someone. "Advice" means advising on appeals, commenting on appeal letters, etc. When we categorize something as "Information", we simply provide general facts on a situation. For example, "Who would I send an appeal to if I failed a Psychology exam" or "Where do I find the policy on exam scheduling"? We intervene for two reasons, sometimes it's because the student has done everything in their power, but more often it's because we want to know rationale for a decision so that we can better understand if a similar situation arises in the future. In 2012-13, we intervened 66 times, or 11.5% of the times an issue was raised.

Did you know?

The Office of the Ombudsperson runs in accordance to a Memorandum of Agreement between the University and the University Students' Council. The latest version of the Memorandum was signed in the Spring of 2009 by representatives of the Society of Graduate Students (SOGS), the MBA Association, main campus and affiliate student councils, and the Presidents of Western and the affiliated colleges.



Have you seen these magnets or posters around campus? The Office of the Ombudsperson is just one office on campus that promotes integrity in everything students do -- academics, athletics, and work.

Advisory Committee Thanks

The Terms of Reference for the Office of the Ombudsperson set out the structure of the Office's Advisory Committee. Committee members are a sounding board with regard to things such as promotion and professional development, and receive and respond to comments about the Office.

There are six voting members of the Committee: a student appointed by the President of the University Students' Council; an affiliate college student elected or appointed by the affiliate students' council; a student appointed by SOGS or the MBAA; a member of the faculty or staff appointed by the President of the University; a member of the faculty or staff appointed by the Senate; and a member of the faculty or staff from the affiliate colleges. The Ombudsperson and Associate Ombudsperson also sit on the Committee.

Although the Committee usually meets twice during an academic year, during the 2012-13 year, the Committee only met once.

Thanks to the members of our 2012-13 Advisory Committee: Dr Lara Descartes (faculty member, Brescia University College), Dr Nanda Dimitrov (staff appointed by the President), Dr Susanne Kohalmi (faculty member appointed by the Senate), Myuri Komaragiri (student, appointed by the President of the USC), Vivek Prabhu (student, Huron University College) and Christopher Shirreff (graduate student).

Professional Development and Personnel News

During the 2012-13 year, I attended the Western Canada regional meeting of the Association of Canadian College and University Ombudspeople (ACCUO) in Victoria, and Associate Ombudsperson Anita Pouliot attended the annual conference of the California Caucus of College and University Ombuds. We both attended ACCUO's Eastern Canada regional meeting and the joint biennial conference of the Forum of Canadian Ombudsman and ACCUO. Thanks to the Human Resources Advanced Funding initiative, I also took a presentation skills workshop.

Also during the year, Anita Pouliot marked 25 years at Western, 23 of those spent in the Office of the Ombudsperson. To better reflect the work Anita does, her title was changed from Assistant Ombudsperson to Associate Ombudsperson.







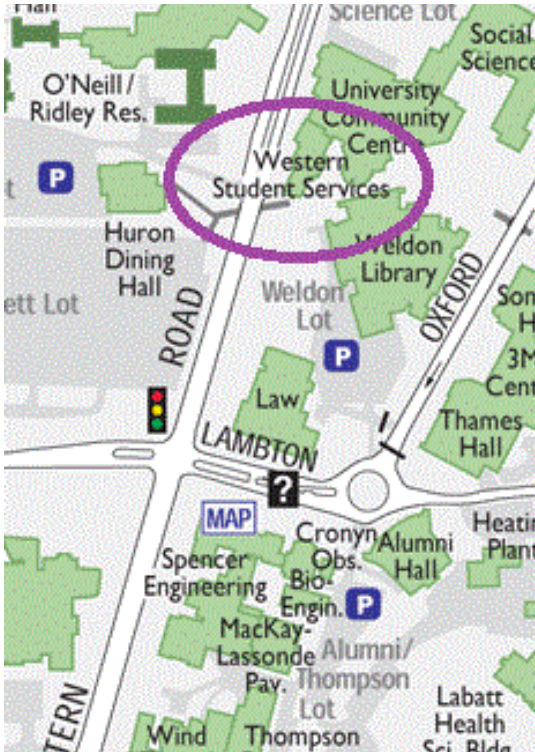
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- Academic or non-academic problem?
Come to us for advice.
- We are confidential,
impartial and independent.
- We serve all students:
graduate, undergraduate,
Kings, Brescia, Huron and
main campus.

OFFICE OF THE **OMBUDSPERSON**
Room 3135 WSS • ombuds@uwo.ca • 519-661-3573
www.uwo.ca/ombuds

Notes or Questions I have for the Office of the Ombudsperson

Finding the Office



The Office of the Ombudsperson is located in Room 3135 of the Western Student Services Building. Just take the elevator to the third floor and turn left, then left again. We are the office around the corner from the elevator, on the left.

You can visit our web site at www.uwo.ca/ombuds or contact us at ombuds@uwo.ca and 519-661-3573. We are open Monday to Friday 8:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. all year. We prefer if you make an appointment, but you may always just take a chance and drop in.



The Office of the Ombudsperson Annual Report is written, designed and laid out by Jennifer Meister. Photo of Associate Ombudsperson and Ombudsperson by Laura Naus. January 2014.