

2017/2018

Preparing students to prevent, manage, and resolve difficult situations.

In accordance with the Ombudsperson Memorandum of Agreement, I am happy to present the annual report for the period August 1, 2017 to July 31, 2018.

As with past reports, Ombuds staff will post this report on our web site, distribute it to university administrators and student council leaders, and present the findings to the University Board of Governors and Senate.

At the time that I was preparing this year's report, a student leader met with me to discuss issues affecting their constituency. About half way through the conversation, we began speaking about the role of the Ombudsperson. The student asked *what* we do for students and *how* we go about our work. I started telling them about how we are impartial and guide students through concerns at the university. I gave my *elevator pitch*.

The Office of the Ombudsperson is a confidential and impartial office that guides students through concerns at the University. We can help with academic and non-academic problems and serve all students on main campus and at the affiliates, whether they are graduates or undergraduates.

The student interrupted me and said, 'No. I mean, exactly how do you work with students'?

My goal with this year's report is to paint as accurate a picture as possible of what happens when a student emails, phones or walks into our office. I hope to present who we are, how we work, and what the concerns are that we address. I also hope that if our readers have questions, they will pop in to see us in Room 3135 of the Western Student Services Building or email ombuds@uwo.ca

Jennifer Meister

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ABOUT THE OMBUDSPERSON

WHAT IS AN OMBUDSPERSON?

I am the first to admit that Ombudsperson is not an accessible word – especially for international students; however, Ombudsman is the title given to offices that are independent of management or government; promote fairness; are impartial; and perform their work confidentially. Ombudsman comes from the Swedish word *umbuds man*, meaning representative. The Swedish government appointed the first Citizens Representative – or Ombudsman -- in 1809. Today there are organization and government ombudspeople around the world. All Canadian provinces and territories, except for Prince Edward Island and Nunavut, have Ombudspeople and there are Ombudspeople at approximately 25 universities and eight colleges across Canada. Western's Office of the Ombudsperson was established in the 1970s.

HOW DOES THE OMBUDS OFFICE ADDRESS STUDENT CONCERNS?

Students often contact us before they file an appeal or speak to a decision maker about a concern. For example, when they receive a disappointing grade or have been accused of a scholastic offense. In these instances, we provide students with **information** such as steps in a process, contact information for the person to whom they should appeal, or the appeal deadline.

The majority of students who come to the Ombuds Office come because they are now aware of their options and need **advice**. For example, a student may feel a quiz administered by a professor was unfair; however, they need to talk to someone about the value of appealing when the quiz is only worth two per cent of their final grade. The advice category also includes when we review appeal letters. We may provide basic editing, but more importantly, we ensure the student has included all the critical information. We also provide advice to graduate students who are experiencing conflict or progression issues.

Finally, on occasion we **intervene** in cases. We do not necessarily intervene on behalf of the student. Usually we intervene to find out more information or to ensure we understand why an administrator made a specific decision. We only intervene with the student's permission. We have an intake sheet that the student signs to give us permission to discuss the situation with a specific office.

WHO ARE WE?

Western's Office of the Ombudsperson has two employees – the Ombudsperson and the Associate Ombudsperson.

I, Jennifer Meister, have been Ombudsperson since August 2011 and served as Acting Ombudsperson between August 2010 and August 2011. I hold a Master's in Education from the Ontario Institute of Studies in Education (OISE) at the University of Toronto and am working toward my Conflict Management Certificate through Western Continuing Studies. Before working at Western, I worked in communications. When not at work, I love quilting and stitching anything that you can put a needle and thread through!

Associate Ombudsperson Anita Pouliot has been with the Office of the Ombudsperson since May 1990. A Western graduate, Anita has a wealth of historical knowledge about university policies and why they are written as they are. She also knows many people across campus and can help guide students to those best able to help them. Anita is a specialist in undergraduate situations, and has led thousands of students through grade appeals, petitions for dean's waivers, and reconsiderations of admission. Of course, no biography of Anita would be complete with mentioning her love of golf.

Students can phone, email, drop in, or request an appointment via the Contact Us area of the Ombuds web site. During the week, we always return email and voice mail within 24 hours of the message. Our office is conveniently located on the third floor of the Western Student Services Building.



JENNIFER MEISTEROmbudsperson



ANITA POULIOTAssociate Ombudsperson

Between August 1, 2017 and July 31, 2018, **681 students** reached out to the Office of the Ombudsperson about **732 different issues**.

1 OUT OF EVERY 500

What was required from these concerns:

contacted us in 2017/18

246

Information

419

Advice

55 Intervention

12
Not specified



SCENARIOS

The following will give you an idea of what we do when a student arrives in our office. I highlight examples from the most common issues of 2017/18. Some issues are distinctively undergraduate or graduate; however, others cross the chasm between graduate and undergraduate.

Most of my peers at other universities provide recommendations in their annual reports. Earlier drafts of this report included recommendations, but I don't believe it's appropriate to make recommendations based on the small window into an issue we in the Office of the Ombudsperson have. Instead, I hope that administrators will take the information provided and determine what warrants consideration. The Ombudsperson does have right to investigate an issue, which I will if I feel it is appropriate and necessary.

When reading this document, please also note that students don't visit the Office of the Ombudsperson when life is great. We don't hear when a professor says they know questions on an exam were "bad" questions and therefore have increased everyone's grade by a per cent. Nor do we hear when students who struggled through their degree return to thank academic counselors for the guidance they provided. There are thousands of good news stories out there – but we don't get to hear them and so they are not in this report! As well, because we don't always hear the outcome after we have made suggestions to students, in this report I can only say what Ombuds staff did in a specific situation. We do sometimes get a thank you when a student resolves their concern, or a follow up message wondering what else the student can do if a suggestion has not worked out.

Close But far away

A student came to us needing 60 per cent in a course in order to stay in their module. The student received 59 per cent. We suggested the student meet with academic counseling to determine whether 59 per cent would indeed be a problem or if it would be 'close enough' to progress. Following a meeting with academic counseling and determining that 60 per cent was a firm requirement, we suggested the student meet with the professor to review their exam. We then explained that if the grade remained at 59 per cent, the student could appeal to the undergraduate chair in the program to remain in the module. We reviewed the student's appeal letter. In the end, the program permitted the student to remain in their module. In this situation, the administrators involved made an exception to a policy. Exceptions are fine, as long as the administrator is willing to make an exception when a similar situation arises in the future. My concern with this exact case is that this student chose to appeal and therefore the situation came to the attention of program management. The program may not have registered other students who received 59 per cent in the course.

I missed the deadline

A student realized past the deadline for adding courses that they wanted to add a course and drop another one. The student had been attending the class they wanted to add, and the professor had agreed. Academic counseling denied the request. The Ombuds office reviewed the student's appeal to the associate dean to do this late course swap; however, we also explained that the deadlines set by Senate are firm. Deadlines are only set aside under exceptional compassionate or medical circumstances.

I want to overload

A student had to drop some courses the previous school year because of a newly diagnosed medical condition. The next term, the student requested permission to overload so that they would be able keep up with their program. Academic counseling and then the associate dean denied the request. The student did not believe this was fair because they had a cumulative average of 76.6 per cent and felt they had proven every year that they could handle the workload. The faculty publishes a requirement of 80 per cent in order to overload. In this case, we guided the student through their letter to the associate dean, but we also explained the published rule and explained that such rules are in place to ensure student success.

Grade adjustments

Scenario #1: A fourth-year student received 79 per cent on a mid-term exam. The professor entered the grade into OWL as 75 per cent. The student talked with the professor regarding the change. The professor had removed some questions from the exam because the professor acknowledged problems with the questions. The professor explained that because of this, some students' grades went up while others went down. We pointed out to the student that grade adjustments are fair as long as all students are treated the same. After reviewing the appeal process and discussing the situation a bit more, the student decided to review their exam and consider whether to appeal to the undergraduate chair.

Scenario #2: A Dean's Honours student finished an elective course with 75 per cent. The student received high marks on all elements of the course except for an essay portion of an exam. The student reviewed the exam with the professor and felt the professor was not able to explain where the student went wrong or what an ideal response would be. The student believed the professor was intentionally lowering marks on the essay portion of the exam because the grades in the other sections were high. We explained the student could appeal their grade or contact the undergraduate chair of the department offering the course to discuss their concerns.

Some students believe the only way to voice concerns about a course is to appeal. This is not true. We often suggest that after speaking with the professor, students write a letter or that a small, representative group from a course visit the chair of the program to discuss concerns. Course evaluations are also a valuable way to communicate constructive comments regarding a course. The University is to be commended for the introduction of on-line evaluations, which make it easier for students to submit course feedback.

Scenario #3: A student in a professional program was receiving high grades in a course but then received a poor grade on the final exam. The student was confused because things that would be marked correct on an assignment were marked incorrect on the exam. We guided the student through the appeal process. The associate dean granted the student a PAS in the course (as opposed to a numerical grade). In

5

this program, a PAS is not included in the calculation of the cumulative average, so the student agreed to this solution. This seemed like a good solution, but as with a previous situation, the program gave the student a PAS because the student appealed. Students who didn't appeal, and those for whom a PAS wouldn't be the best solution, should also be considered.

Scenario #4: An upper year student came to us with concerns regarding grading. A midterm exam included both multiple choice and short answer questions. The professor gave students the higher grade they earned. i.e. If they earned an 82 per cent on the multiple-choice section of the exam, and a 57 per cent on the short answer, they were given 82 per cent on the exam. Students had not been notified before or during the exam that this was how it would be graded. The student who visited the Ombuds Office earned 76 per cent and 79 per cent on the two sections; therefore, they earned a grade of 79 per cent whereas the student who received 57 per cent and 82 per cent on the different sections, would have earned 82 per cent. The student discussed the situation with the professor who felt it was fair. We explained the appeal process to the student, but suggested they speak to the undergraduate chair before appealing because this situation affected all students in the class.

Scenario #5: According to OWL gradebook, a fourth-year student with aspirations for Law school received 80 per cent in a course. When the student looked at their grade report at the end of term, the professor had lowered the grade to 79 per cent. The student contacted the professor who said that he had to adjust the original grades because the class average was higher than the department's posted average for classes. The student did not believe this was fair because a change from 80 per cent to 79 per cent is a significant difference when applying for Law school. We explained to the student that grade adjustments are sometimes necessary and are fair if the program applies the adjustment equally to all students.

Record clean up

Intense competition for graduate and professional program spaces means there is little room for missteps in undergraduate grades. The reality is that some graduate and professional programs don't allow students to repeat courses and .2 of a difference in a GPA can make a difference in whether a student is admitted. Due to this intense competition, we have seen an increase in current and former students inquiring as to how their academic record can be 'cleaned up'. The University appeal policy is clear on deadlines; however, we usually recommend the individual contact the associate dean of their faculty to explain the circumstances that affected their education. As with other situations, we offer to review letters to associate deans. Following are some examples where a current or former student was appealing to have past performance removed from their academic record.

Scenario #1: A Western graduate applying to a professional program approached our office about a poor grade. We explained that the individual could appeal to the associate dean undergraduate in their home faculty, but we also explained that it would be rare for an associate dean to remove one grade from a record. An associate dean usually grants permission for changes only when the circumstances were extreme and only to all courses in a specific term or year. It is very difficult for a student to prove that a circumstance affected only one or two courses. In this specific case, we also explained to the individual that it might be better to explain to the schools to which they were applying why the grade was so poor.

Scenario #2: A Western graduate, who had undergraduate and graduate degrees, and was applying to a professional school, visited the Office of the Ombudsperson. Mental illness had affected one of the students' undergraduate years at Western. They wanted to appeal to have their grades changed to late withdrawals (WDN). Although Ombuds staff pointed out to the alumna that they were clearly outside of the appeal timeline provided in the policies, we did suggest they write the associate dean of their former home faculty. The alumna did that. When the appeal was denied at the associate dean level, the student appealed to the Senate Review Board Academic (SRBA). The appeal was also denied at SRBA.

Scenario #3: A student graduating at June convocation had applied to be licensed with a professional organization. The student came to us because they had suffered many concussions throughout one of their years at Western and they believed this was why two of their marks were below 65 per cent. The specific professional organization states that the applicant cannot have a grade below 65 per cent. The student wanted to appeal the grades. We explained to the student that they were past the appeal deadline. We also suggested to the student that they write a letter to the professional organization explaining the situation.

WHAT OTHER UNIVERSITIES ARE DOING TO ADDRESS SIMILAR LATE WITHDRAWAL ISSUES

Some North American universities have processes for requests of late withdrawals. Ryerson University has a form that students may complete to request retroactive withdrawal of a course or courses: https://www.ryerson.ca/registrar/faculty/forms/WDR-WDL. Grounds for withdrawal include compassionate, medical and procedural error. If granted, the course is expunged from their record. Ryerson students can also separately request a fee adjustment. The University of Minnesota has a policy by which students can drop a course after the drop date but before the exam without any explanation. Students can only do this once in their undergraduate career, and a designation of W is put on their record: https://www.cfans.umn.edu/late-drop.

For the Fall 2018 term, Western has introduced the discovery

credit option. With this option, students may elect to take up to 1.0 elective courses on a Pass/Fail basis. The goal of this option is to allow students to explore disciplines outside their major with less concern about grades. Currently there is no provision for this option to be applied retroactively and students must choose the option before the course drop deadline. Further investigation could be done into the impact of a poor year on graduate or professional school applications. This investigation could include looking into the impact of a course withdrawal notification (WDN) on a grade report as opposed to expunging the course from the record.

The role of undergraduate academic counselors

Ninety percent of individuals who responded to the 2016/17 Survey of Graduating Students said they would recommend Western to a friend (Western University, 2017, p.8). In the same survey, respondents rated their satisfaction with academic counseling at Western above average (Western University, 2017, p.9). The latter result may be because each faculty provides the academic counseling model that works for their students. As well, academic counselors take their lead from each individual student as to what their relationship with a specific student will look like. Some students might only see their academic counselor for three ten-minute meetings throughout their time at Western; other students might need coaching throughout their program and might need to meet with an academic counselor a few times a term. Academic counselors provide whatever the student needs; in any given day an academic counselor might be a cheerleader, a coach, or an ally.

When issues pertaining to academic counseling come to the Office of the Ombudsperson, it is usually because of a policy or process that isn't being used efficiently and not something that academic counseling is specifically responsible for, although they are the link between the student and the process.

The scenarios below illustrate what happens when a student doesn't take advantage of the advisement that academic counselors can provide or when the academic counseling system doesn't work as intended.

Scenario #1: In March 2018, a first year student visited the Office of the Ombudsperson with many questions ranging from accessing tax receipts to registering for second year courses. The student was falling between the cracks. I asked if the student had been to academic counseling and they said yes, but for various reasons the student needed further guidance. I spent time with the student explaining where to find their tax receipt and how to find course requirements for the program they were hoping to be in. I then took the student to Learning

Skills Services to sign up for exam preparation sessions. This is an extreme example of a student that was overwhelmed and was clearly unable to advocate for themselves; however, it's also a good example of where a connection with an academic counselor may have helped the student feel less overwhelmed. It is also an example of where it's beneficial for academic counsellors to be able to master the 'art of the referral'. Information sessions provided by Student Accessibility Services, Wellness Services, Learning Skills, Financial Aid, and our office to name a few examples, help academic counselors get a good grasp on who around campus can assist a student with a struggle.

Scenario #2: Western International directed a third-year student to the Office of the Ombudsperson. The student was on academic probation and had failed a first term course, meaning that they would be required to withdraw from Western once academic counseling adjudicated them in May. The student was confused and didn't know what to do. When asked if the student had visited academic counseling to understand the procedure of applying for a dean's waiver, the student said yes, but that they needed more guidance. Staff in the Office of the Ombudsperson explained what would occur during adjudication in May and how the dean's waiver process worked. With permission from the student, we also spoke to the associate dean involved to determine best practices for some of the specific issues the student was facing. When the time arose, we reviewed the student's dean's waiver.

The key to continued academic counseling success seems to be in making processes, such as student medical certificates and course registration, more efficient so that academic counselors can be freed up to provide coaching for students when needed.

Lack of English Skills

Evidence of English proficiency for those applicants whose first language is not English is required before an applicant will be considered for admission (http://welcome.uwo.ca/admissions/admission-requirements/english-language-proficiency.html) Even with this proof, each year we meet with students whose lack of academic success appears to be partially due to their poor command of the English language. The following cases and recommendation refer to graduate students; however, the success of undergraduate students for

whom English is not their first language also needs consideration.

Scenario #1: A professor accused a graduate student of a scholastic offense. The student visited our office to seek advice. We reviewed the policy with the student and advised the student on their right to appeal. The student drafted an appeal letter and sent it to the Office of the Ombudsperson for review. It was clear from the letter that the student did not have a good command of the English language. Ombuds staff made suggestions regarding content but also suggested they have a native English speaker review the letter for grammar and syntax errors. We also suggested the student could visit the Writing Centre. The School of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies did not grant the appeal and the student was required to withdraw from Western. The student appealed to SRBA, but SRBA upheld the decision of the associate vice provost. This case and similar cases raise the question as to whether a student's lack of English skills, especially when they are in graduate studies, increases the stress and difficulty of a program – and possibly leads the student to commit a scholastic offense.

Scenario #2: Another graduate student approached the Office when they were accused of copying from a web site and submitting it as their own work. This was the student's second offence. As with the previous situation, it became obvious that the student did not have adequate English skills to complete their program. After a discussion with the student regarding English programs in London that would help the student be successful, the student decided to withdraw from their program, improve their English and reapply in the future.

Student/Supervisor Conflict

Western's School of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies is a leader in developing programs for graduate student success, including introducing guidelines for supervisors and students to follow. In 2017/18, SGPS introduced Own Your Future – a program aimed at helping PhD students develop professional skills and prepare for a future that may or may not include a career in the Academy. As part of Own Your Future, the Office of the Ombudsperson has teamed with Equity and Human Rights Services to present a module on conflict. We discuss the benefits of conflict, but also discuss what to do when conflict threatens a supervisor/student relationship.

In 2017/18, the Office of the Ombudsperson met with 18 graduate students regarding supervisory issues – 20 per cent of graduate student visits. In these discussions, we helped the student see the issue from their supervisor's standpoint and gave student the tools they need should a conflict arise. Following are two examples of how we addressed graduate student/supervisory concerns.

Scenario #1: A student came to us regarding a situation that was an accommodation issue; but after spending some time with the student, it was clear that what started as a request for accommodation was turning into a conflict. The student had a doctor's note stating that they were unable to lift items beyond a specific weight; however, part of the student's research involved lifting equipment onto a table. The student asked for assistance and suggested an undergraduate student might benefit from the experience. According to the student, the supervisor denied the request to have assistance, saying that the lack of a consistent schedule would make it too difficult to have an undergraduate assistant. The student also said the supervisor accused them of being a poor student and not willing to do the required work. The student stated that the supervisor did this to other students as well. Rather than automatically sending the student to Student Accessibility Services or Equity and Human Rights Services, we spoke to the student about how to have a conversation with the supervisor regarding the accommodations they required, and to attempt to work out a solution. The student did not feel overly comfortable speaking to the supervisor, so we suggested they speak with the graduate chair instead. We conducted a role play of the conversation, with the student acting as themselves and Ombuds staff acting as the graduate chair. This gave the student the confidence to meet with the graduate chair to discuss what was occurring. The student is continuing in their program and with their supervisor.

Some institutions, including the University of Toronto, University of Alberta and University of Michigan, offer student-run conflict resolution options. A student sometimes benefits from a peer who has experienced a similar concern. Over the past two to three years, I have recommended to the Office of the Ombudsperson Advisory Committee that the office introduce a peer conflictmanagement option; however, this has not come to fruition. The Office does not currently have the space for peers, and although space issues can be rectified with novel solutions, I do not have the time to adequately develop such a program. I intend to address this concern in budget planning this upcoming cycle.

VISITOR OVERVIEW

Following is a numerical overview of who has visited the Office of the Ombudsperson in the past year.

Visitors over time

(Note: Some students come to the Office of the Ombuds for more than one concern. The number of concerns brought to the office was higher.)

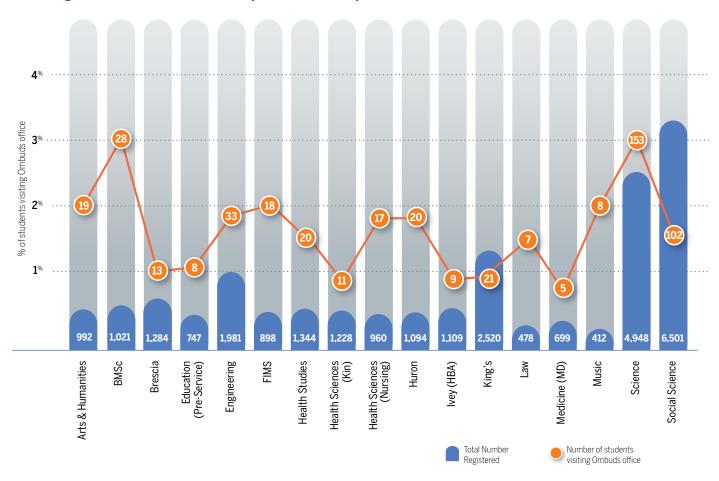


DEGREE LEVEL OF STUDENTS Undergraduate Master's **Doctoral**



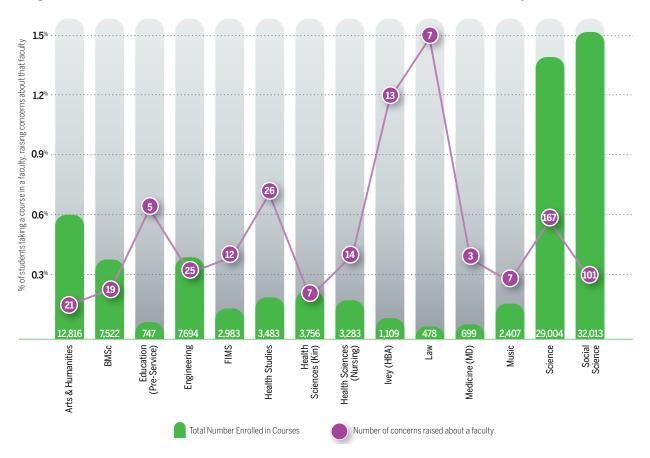
earlier in this report.)

Undergraduate student visits by home faculty



Undergraduate students by faculty of concern

The following chart illustrates visitors who have concerns about courses in other than their home faculty.



^{*}Brescia (10 concerns), Huron (12 concerns), and King's (18 concerns) are not included in this graph because the teaching activity at the colleges is not publicly available.

Undergraduate concern break down – academic and financial

The following chart illustrates the academic and financial concerns raised by undergraduate students who visited the Office of the Ombudsperson.

467 of the 563 undergraduate concerns raised dealt with academic and/or financial concerns.

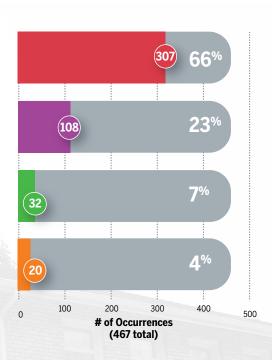
Category of concern

General academic related (inc. grade issues, program requirements, and course management)

Administrative procedures (required to withdraw, admission, late withdrawal, registration, add/drop deadlines, readmission)

Scholastic Offences

Financial (fees, scholarships, financial aid)



GRADUATE STUDENT VISITORS

Although graduate students register in the School of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies, when they visit the Office of the Ombudsperson we record the faculty hosting their program. The first graph below shows the number and percentage of master's and doctoral students visiting the Office from various disciplinary faculties. Note: There were 15 students who did not identify their discipline.

The second graph shows the number and percentage of master's and doctoral students taking courses in a faculty, raising concerns about that faculty.

Graduate concerns – academic and financial

(100 of 115 concerns raised by graduate students dealt with academic or financial concerns.)

12.8%

Financial (including financial aid and funding)

7.4%

Admissions

70.2%

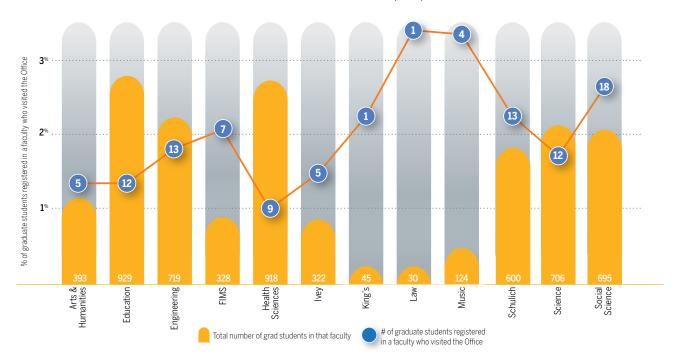
Academic (including grades, progression and supervision)

9.6%

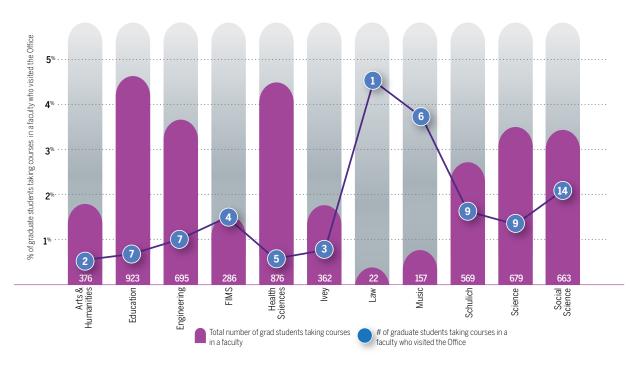
Scholastic Offence

Concerns per student's home faculty

(Note: Not all students tell us their program so they are not identified below but are identified in the overall count of student visitors earlier in this report.)



Concerns per course faculty

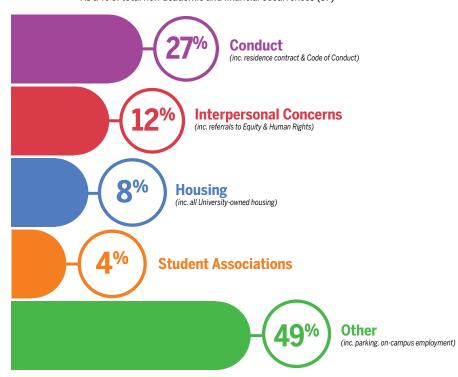


UNDERGRADUATE AND GRADUATE

NON-ACADEMIC CONCERNS

The Office of the Ombudsperson also guides students through non-academic concerns, including Code of Conduct violations, residence and residence conduct issues, and concerns related to parking on campus. The Office of the Ombudsperson is not an official office of complaint for the University but sometimes students just want to be heard.

As a % of total non-academic and financial occurrences (97)



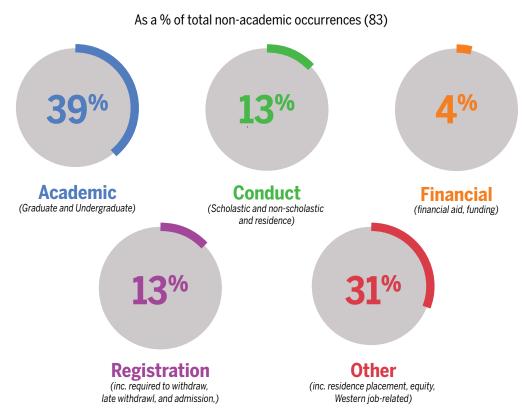




NON-STUDENT DATA

Working with administrators, alleviating parent concerns, and responding to inquiries from the public is another important role we play on campus. We enjoy talking through options with administration, and are always happy to tell a parent what a policy states and why a rule is in place. We don't give any identifying details to parents unless we have the student's written permission.

In 2017/18 we heard from 83 administrators, staff, family members of students, and members of the public.



Parliamentary Ombudsman of Malta. (2014, Feb 18). What does the word Ombudsman mean? Retrieved from https://www.ombudsman.org.mt/what-does-the-word-ombudsman-mean-2/

Western University. (2017, September). Report on the survey of graduating students: 2016-17. Retrieved from https://www.ipb.uwo.ca/documents/2016-17 Survey of Graduating Students.pdf

GETTING THE WORD OUT

Associate Ombudsperson Anita Pouliot and I enjoy getting out of the office and talking about how we can guide students through their concerns. You may have seen us at one of the following events during the 2017/18 year:

Outreach

New Faculty Orientation, booth

SOGS Amazing Race, stop on the race

Residence staff orientation, booth

Social Science Faculty Day, booth

SGPS Fall Orientation, booth

Orientation Services Fair, booth

Student Appeals Support Committee, appeals training

Own Your Future, conflict management training

Academic Counseling presentations

GradLife, committee member

Presentation of 2016/17 Annual Report to University Planning (SCUP) and Audit Committee of Board of Governors.

Response to questions at University Senate

Response to inquiries from Western Gazette

Information tables, Brescia and King's

Student Council presentations, Brescia and King's

Conflict management presentations, department specific

Input

Input to review of OWL publishing guidelines

Input to Student Mental Health and Mental Wellness Strategic Plan

Conferences/Professional Development

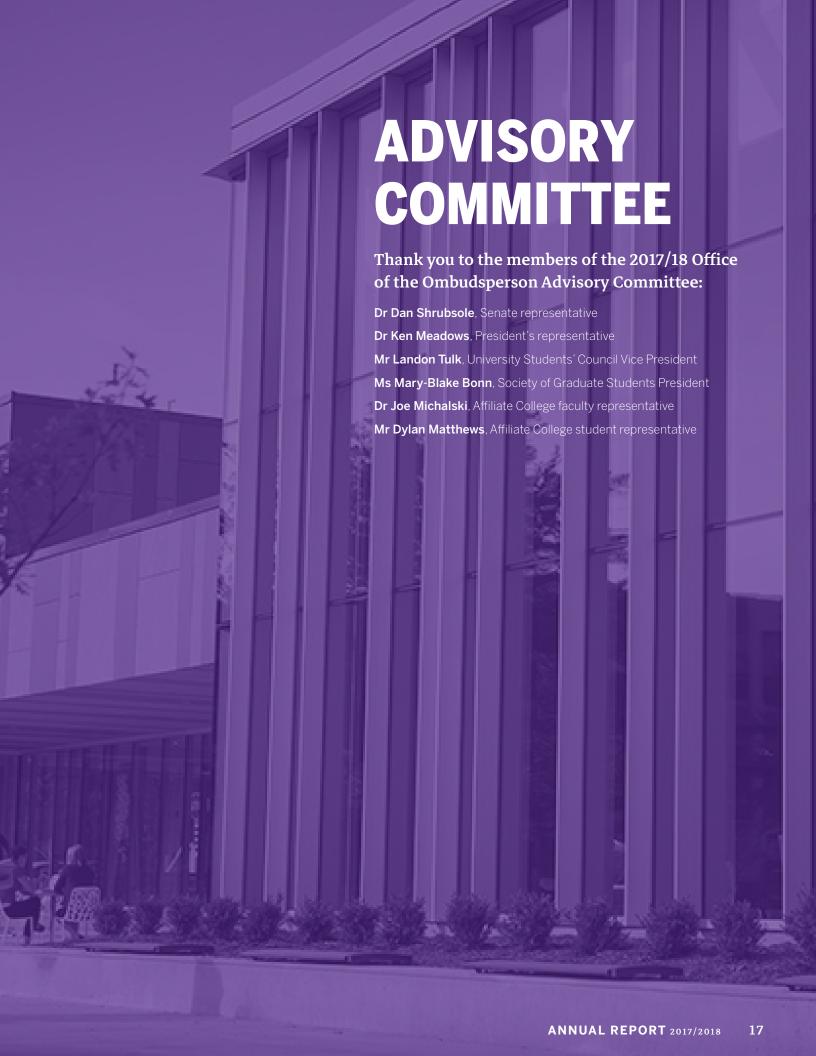
Joint European Network of Ombuds in Higher Education/Association of Canadian College and University Ombudspersons conference, Edinburgh, Scotland

Collaborative Conflict Resolution, Western Continuing Studies (Jennifer Meister)

Celebrating Diversity Using an Anti-Oppression Framework

Applied Suicide Intervention Skills Training (ASIST) (Anita Pouliot)







Office of the Ombudsperson

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