



## Office of the Ombudsperson

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The Office of the Ombudsperson is jointly funded by the University of Western Ontario, the Affiliated University Colleges, the University Students' Council and Student Councils of the Affiliated University Colleges, the Society of Graduate Students, and the MBA Association.





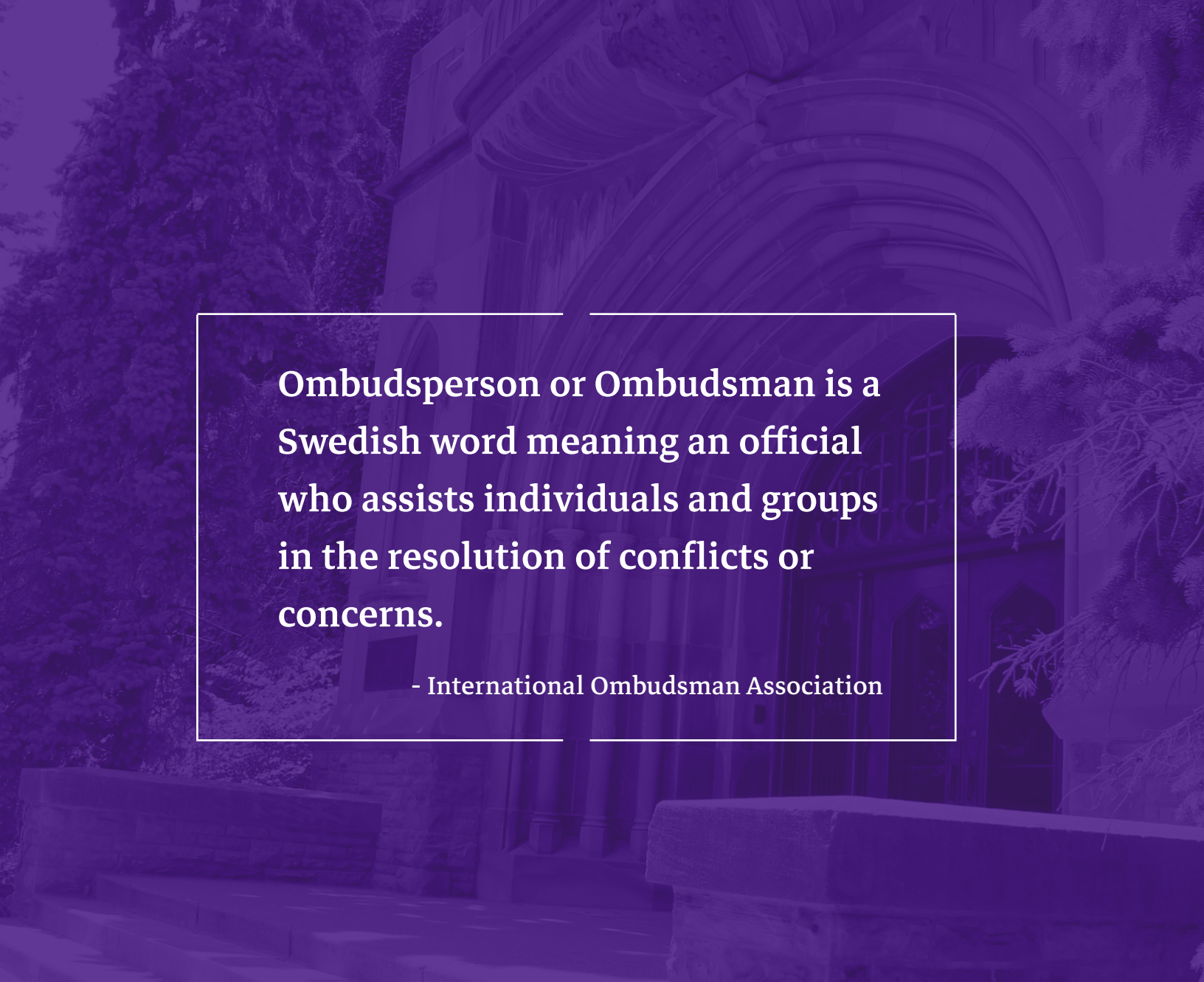
OFFICE  
OF THE

**OMBUDSPERSON**

# ANNUAL REPORT

2018/2019

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



**Ombudsperson or Ombudsman is a Swedish word meaning an official who assists individuals and groups in the resolution of conflicts or concerns.**

**- International Ombudsman Association**

The Office of the Ombudsperson's annual report provides information about the concerns brought to the Office, as well as data regarding the number of students who visited, the program they are in, and the program with which they have a concern.

The Memorandum of Agreement between Western and the University Students' Council mandates the annual report. This report marks the 38th year Western's Office of the Ombudsperson has published a report. Reports from the past 10 years are on the Ombuds web site. All others are available by contacting the office.



# A SUMMARY OF 2018/2019

The number of students reaching out to Western's Ombuds Office continues to increase. **Between August 1, 2018 and July 31, 2019, 814 students visited the Office regarding 879 concerns. This is an increase of 198 students from the previous year and an increase from 1.8% of student enrolment in 2017/18 to 2.1% in 2018/19.**

Numbers do not tell the whole story; however, they do send some important messages:

- With stiff competition for graduate and professional school admission, undergraduate students are desperate for good grades.
- Some graduate students at Western face a challenging path to their degree.
- Some students struggle to have the "Best Student Experience".
- Universities and Colleges across North America are reporting a decline in resiliency amongst students (Gray, 2015; Hellemans, 2018; Levine and Dean, 2012). In fact, the Canadian Association of College and University Student Services (CACUSS)/Canadian Mental Health Association (CMHA) "Post-Secondary Student Mental Health: Guide to a Systemic Approach" (2013), points to the importance of university programs that build resiliency and coping skills. There are many reasons for declining resiliency amongst University students. For example, psychologists say that this generation of young people have not learned how to accept failure, or experience failure without adult intervention (Gray, 2015).
- Although the Office of the Registrar and Faculties have done a great job ensuring information and processes are accessible online, undergraduate students still have an appetite for in-person meetings. Perhaps in-person meetings make already stressed students feel more in control of a situation. Whatever the reason, student-facing resources at Western are being stretched. For example, offices that may once have had time to discuss the pros and cons of appealing a grade, do not anymore and they are sending students to the Ombuds office. There was a time when sending a student to the Ombudsperson was an exception, or a last resort, but the impact of stretched resources elsewhere at the University is that the Ombuds Office has now become one of the first stops a student makes when they need information and advice on an academic or non-academic concern.

In addition to increasing numbers, cases are becoming more complex. Factors that contribute to case complexity are number of meetings with a student; policies and jurisdictions involved in a single case (e.g. Code of Conduct, Residence contract, and potentially external {court or law enforcement} bodies); and duration of the case. We do not currently have an automated tracking mechanism for case complexity, although we are investigating this for the future.

In the case scenario section of this report I provide examples, including those of students who have come to us requesting retroactive accommodation for courses taken years before; and graduate students whose supervisors are telling them they are unfit for graduate studies. Associate Ombudsperson Anita Pouliot and I pride ourselves on our ability to listen carefully and provide reasoned suggestions even in the most complex of cases, but this takes time and multiple meetings.

I hope you enjoy this snapshot of our activities over the year and encourage you to ask questions about the work of the Office of the Ombudsperson. Our contact information is on the back cover of this report. Anita and I enjoy our work and the contribution we make to the experience of Western's students.



Jennifer Meister,  
Ombudsperson, Western University





# SCENARIOS

The following scenarios provide a glimpse of the concerns raised to the Office of the Ombudsperson. The Ombuds Office is not an official office of complaint for the University; therefore, when students visit us we listen to their concerns and then guide them through their procedural options. We also speak to students about the conversations they could have with decision makers, and occasionally speak to decision makers when a student is having difficulties representing themselves.

Although staff at most university and college ombuds offices in Canada follow the Standards of Practice laid out by the Association of Canadian University and College Ombudspersons (ACCUO), we do differ when it comes to the content of our annual reports. For example, I do not make recommendations in the annual report. Instead, Anita and I work cooperatively with administrators throughout the year, explaining processes and the key aspects of fairness.

## Challenge for Credit

A student took a course twice but withdrew from the course in both instances. Put together, the student had the course work completed except for one component. The student appealed to the department chair, the associate dean, and then to the Senate Review Board Academic (SRBA), to be awarded the credit if they finished the final component. All levels denied the appeal.

This was an opportunity to review Western's policies on Aegrotat Standing and consider implementing a Challenge for Credit policy. The University only grants Aegrotat Standing when a student, because of compassionate or medical reasons, is unable to write the makeup of a final exam within six months of the original exam date. Western does not have a Challenge for Credit policy. Interestingly, some other Canadian universities do, providing students with credit for skills acquired through past professional experiences. All universities that offer them, record Challenge Credits as such or as Pass/Fail and no numerical or letter grade is awarded. The University of Waterloo awards Challenge Credits but a student must take the final exam for the course they are challenging.

## Late withdrawal and retroactive accommodation

In last year's annual report, I remarked on increased inquiries from current and former students regarding how to "clean up" their academic record. I provided three scenarios and outlined some of the retroactive withdrawal policies implemented by other North American universities. Through 2018/19 we continued to receive inquiries about late withdrawals and retroactive accommodation.

With the 2016 directive provided by the Ontario Human Rights Commission, decision makers must at least consider retroactive accommodation requests based on mental health. This is empowering students and graduates to request grade adjustments, or at a minimum late withdrawal, for courses in which they could not succeed due to illness.

Western's associate deans (undergraduate) are to be commended for making consistent decisions regarding retroactive withdrawals. One associate dean explained: "In order to be fair to all students, I can only permit a late drop without penalty when there is a strong rationale. In particular, I need to be convinced that the student (i) could not have been reasonably expected to complete the courses and (ii) could not have known that before the drop deadline." Even though this is not formal policy, it is the closest Western has come to establishing standard language around retroactive withdrawals.

As I write this report, Western's revised Policy and Procedures on Academic Accommodation for Students with Disabilities have just come into effect. The new documents do not reference the need for decision makers to consider retroactive accommodation or a procedure for requesting retroactive accommodation. As well, the directive from the Ontario Human Rights Commission states that information to support accommodation, especially information pertaining to mental health, should be received and maintained centrally. Of course, this is in place for current students, but if a former student requests retroactive accommodation, or if a student in an upper year requests accommodation for a grade in a previous year with documentation addressing that, the documentation goes to the associate dean. Addressing the various aspects of retroactive accommodation in the policy and procedures would make it more transparent to students and alumni how the decision is being made.

Following are some of the cases that came to the Office of the Ombudsperson in 2018/19 regarding late withdrawal and retroactive accommodation:

Scenario #1) A student transferred to Western at the beginning of second year. Their first-year (transferred) grades, from the previous institution, were good, as were their Western third-year grades; however, their Western second-year grades were poor, and the student wanted to appeal because they were ill at the time of their second-year exams and unable to do well. The student had received 50s and 60s in those courses. Their poor second-year grades were keeping them from the standard required for a top law school. We pointed out that it is not the University's practice to revisit grades unless there is a documented disability that supports it, but we do not keep students from appealing. The student appealed and their appeal was denied.

Scenario #2) A student had many mental health challenges during the second term of 2017/2018. The student had been hospitalized many times and at the end of term was not able to access communication devices such as a phone

# DID YOU KNOW?

**1 OUT OF EVERY 48**

Western students contacted us in 2018/19



In Ontario, **15 colleges and universities** have Ombuds Offices

**50% FUNDING**

for Western's Office of the Ombudsperson comes from the **University** and 50% from a **mandatory student fee**

The University provides office space at no cost



or computer. In other words, the student could not inform the University that they would be unable to write their exams. The student failed their second term courses. The student was sent to the Office of the Ombudsperson by their Faculty. We explained how the student could appeal and then reviewed the draft of their appeal letter. The appeal was granted, and the grades were changed from failures to withdrawals.

Scenario #3) A student had 6.0 failed courses on their record, the maximum allowed. One reason for so many failures was that the student had two in progress notifications (IPR) on their record that had turned to failures. These were courses the student was not able to complete because of extenuating circumstances (poor mental health). The student wanted to appeal to have the IPRs changed to WDNs instead of Fs. With documentation, the Faculty granted the student's appeal and they were able to continue.

Scenario #4) A support service sent a student to us for advice. The student had been having a difficult time at Western with mixed academic results and wanted to appeal for withdrawals from all courses so they could get a fresh start. We were not confident the student had grounds for appeal or that the Associate Dean would grant the appeal; regardless, we worked with the student over a few weeks to assist them in making their appeal as strong as possible. We asked questions pertaining to the chronology of events, trying to determine why some courses had been impacted more than others. The Associate Dean denied the appeal, but this is a good example of a situation in which a written policy may have helped the student realize what the practice is around transcript changes.

Scenario #5) Similar to the situation above, a student wanted their courses expunged from their record. The student hadn't done as well as expected and was unhappy with their decision to come to Western. We explained the student would need to have documentation to support their request. We do not believe the student appealed.

## The sometimes-challenging road to a graduate degree

Leaders at Western's School of Graduate and Postgraduate Studies know that students sometimes struggle to earn their degree, and SGPS has developed programs and guidelines to help. Even with this, we still hear upsetting stories from students who are not being supported by their supervisors, are scared of the repercussions if they report poor treatment by a supervisor and are not receiving the quality of education Western promises.

Following are examples of concerns that graduate students brought to the Office of the Ombudsperson between August 1, 2018 and July 31, 2019.

Scenario #1) A Master's student took three weeks off from

their program to care for an ill relative. The student spoke to the supervisor about the situation and the supervisor seemed supportive of the student being away; however, when the student returned the supervisor said they would not pay the student for the three weeks they missed. We explained to the student that Western allows graduate students to take at least two weeks of vacation per year at a time that is suitable to the student and supervisor. We also said the student could have applied for a leave of absence. The supervisor may not have known or understood the policies, but it is the supervisor's role to know the policies. We referred the student to the Associate Dean of Graduate Studies. The Associate Dean followed up on the situation, and the student was not deducted any pay for being away.

Scenario #2) A Master's student was struggling in a course. When they went to the professor for help, the professor told them: "Some students are just meant to fail". The student explained they felt they got the correct answer by guessing, not by understanding. The professor said they did not care what process the student followed as long as the answer was correct. This type of instruction is not restricted to graduate students, but I would argue it is a bad example to set for someone who may be heading toward academia as a career.

Scenario #3) A recent doctoral graduate came to the Office of the Ombudsperson with concerns about how their former supervisor was treating them now they had graduated. They had three papers under review at various publications based on the research completed during their doctorate. Each journal had sent procedural emails to the supervisor, but the supervisor was not replying. The student reminded the supervisor to reply but nothing was happening. Later in this section, I will refer to the expectations and requirements for supervisors that SGPS has introduced. These expectations address treatment when the student is at Western, but perhaps they need to extend to the role the supervisor plays in an individual's early career.

Scenario #4) A doctoral student was concerned with some of the language a supervisor used in lab meetings. The student said this was a general concern in the lab. The graduate chair was also concerned with the accounts they had heard of the supervisor's language and wanted to speak to the supervisor; however, the students were scared of the repercussions if the graduate chair spoke to the supervisor. I explained to the student that there is a right way to approach this conversation and suggested a small group of the students set up a meeting with the supervisor to discuss how the students were receiving the supervisor's words. I also said the graduate chair would most likely have a similar approach with the supervisor. I explained no graduate chair would be heavy-handed in their approach with a supervisor. SGPS has introduced the Own Your Future program, including conflict management and communication workshops, which help to provide doctorate students with the tools to have these types of difficult conversations with supervisors.

Scenario #5) Another support service on campus referred an international doctorate student to the Office. The student was clearly suffering. They had dark circles under their eyes and patches where their hair had fallen out. The student was working at an off-campus lab where their supervisor was yelling at them and saying they were not working hard enough. The student went on a one-term medical leave, and SGPS and the program ensured the student got a new supervisor.

There are two unrelated issues with this case:

- First, the University solved this student's problem, but if the supervisor remains, future students may experience the same treatment. As well, the supervisor has not had an opportunity to learn about how their behavior affects others. Later in this section I discuss new mechanisms SGPS has put in place to ensure supervisors are fulfilling their requirements.
- Second, the student supplied their documentation for medical leave to their program office. Graduate students often do this. To ensure confidentiality, documentation is supposed to go to the School of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies. This is something that is not clear to graduate chairs or coordinators, let alone students.

Scenario #6) A support service on campus referred a sixth-year doctoral student to us. The student was not getting any feedback from their supervisor and said they were leaving at the end of the year with or without their PhD. We sent the student to their graduate chair to discuss the issue. The graduate chair ended up speaking to the supervisor who eventually reviewed the chapters the student had submitted, but problems arose a second time. The graduate chair signed off on the student's thesis because the supervisor was being unresponsive.

Scenario #7) A student needed to have a difficult conversation with their supervisor because they were concerned with how the supervisor was treating them. We reviewed how the student could state some of his concerns. This is an example of how things should develop! As mentioned previously, SGPS has developed the Own Your Future program in part to give students these types of tools.

Scenario #8) During 2018/19, three doctoral students came to the Ombuds Office because they had been "fired" by their supervisors. Students can only be withdrawn by their program's graduate chair, and only if they have failed to progress or have failed a major milestone. Progression issues should not be a surprise to the student. The supervisor(s) outline the concerns in the student's annual progress report. Luckily, in the cases of the three students who came to the Ombuds Office, the Associate Deans and SGPS moved quickly to intervene and find new supervisors for the students.

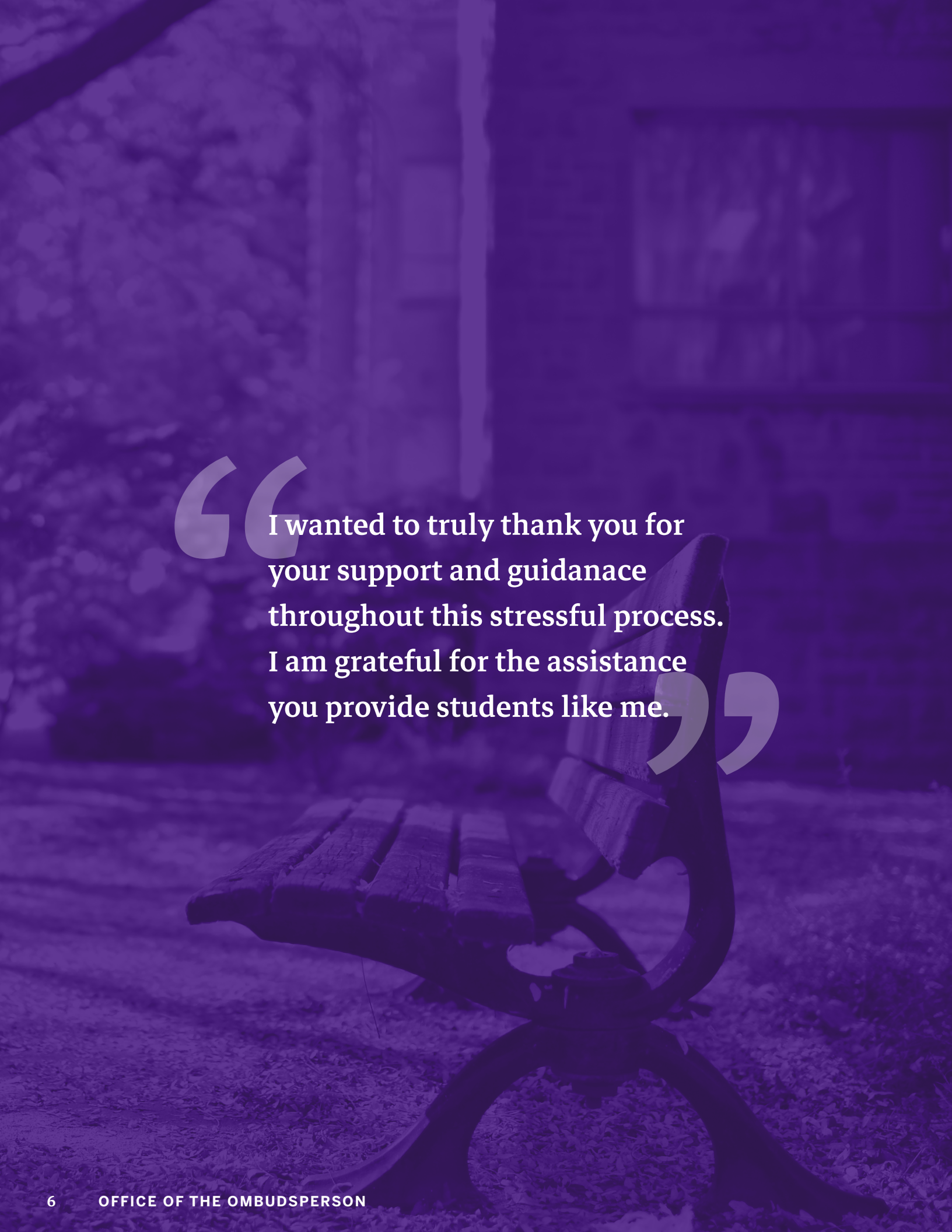
Graduate student issues are a topic at every Ombuds conference; however, Western is putting a lot of effort into ensuring graduate students have the best possible experience. At the faculty level, graduate education committees are discussing how they can encourage supervisors to move their students along in a supportive manner. Student Experience has recently hired a Manager of Graduate Student Life who, along with SGPS and the Society of Graduate Students, will work to ensure students have the best experience possible and take their wellness seriously.

The Graduate Education Council of SGPS has introduced two documents -- Expectations and Requirements of Supervisors, and Expectations and Requirements of Graduate Students in Thesis-Based Programs. The annual progress report has always been the tool by which supervisors can flag when a student is having trouble; however, SGPS has recently introduced a mechanism for students to make a formal complaint to SGPS for investigation regarding supervisors that they feel are not meeting the expectations laid out. In cases where student complaints are found to be substantiated, SGPS will work with Faculty Relations to determine appropriate actions. This will not remove the power imbalance between students and supervisors, but it sends a clear message that Western takes the supervision of graduate students seriously.



SGPS has developed Own Your Future with the goal of giving doctoral students the tools they need to succeed at Western and beyond. Own Your Future workshops help students learn valuable skills in conflict resolution, communicating among cultures, and becoming a leader. Staff of the Ombuds Office delivers four of these workshops: Don't let conflict get in your way; Why can't you be like me? Communicating when personalities clash; When coworkers conflict; and Now What? Conflict in the workplace.





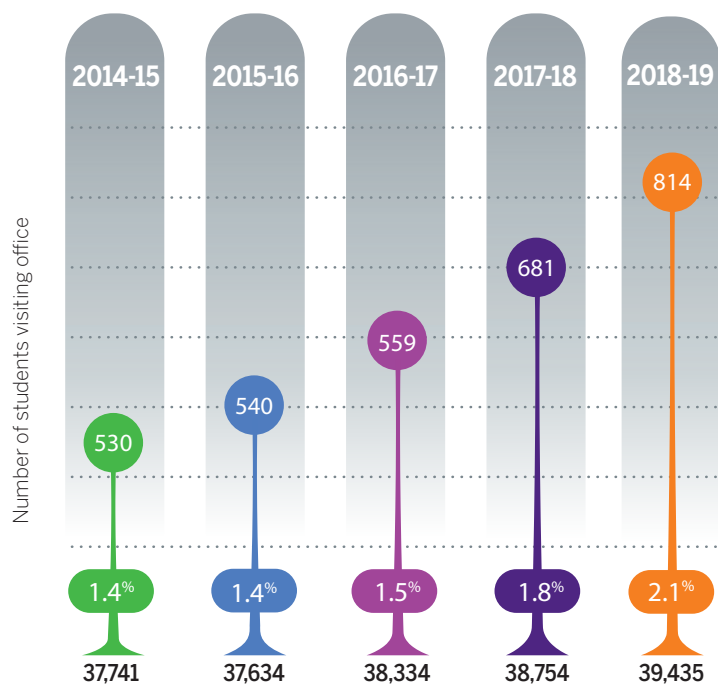
“I wanted to truly thank you for your support and guidance throughout this stressful process. I am grateful for the assistance you provide students like me.”

# 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.)



\*Enrolment numbers are taken from Western's Institutional Planning and Budgeting Five-Year Enrolment Comparison location on line at <https://www.ipb.uwo.ca/facts.php>.

## DEGREE LEVEL OF STUDENT VISITORS

**85%**  
Undergraduate

**8%**  
Master's

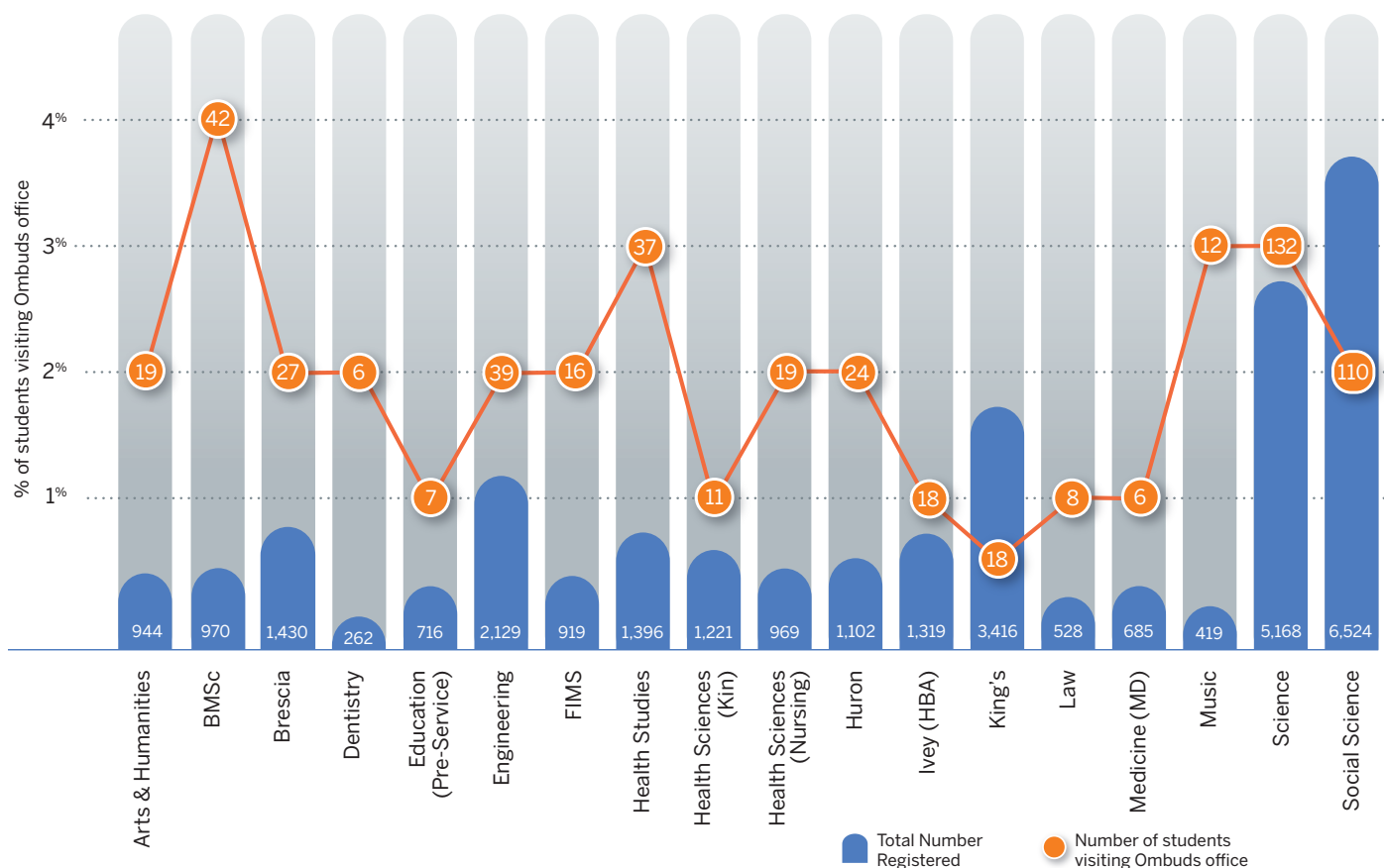
**7%**  
Doctoral



# UNDERGRADUATE STUDENT VISITORS

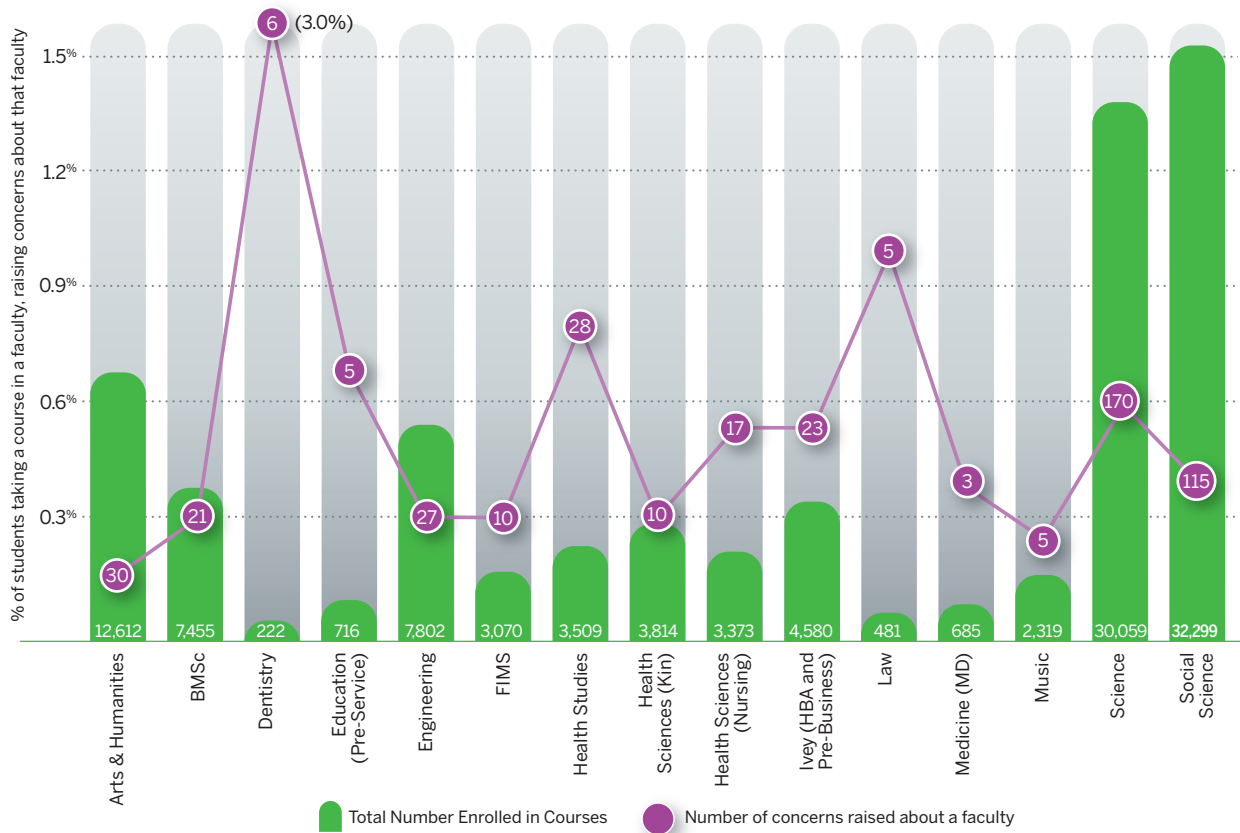
## Undergraduate student visits by home faculty

The following graph illustrates the home faculty of undergraduate students visiting the Office. (Note: not all students tell us their program so they are not included below, but are included in the overall count of student visitors earlier in this report.)



# Undergraduate students by faculty of concern

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



\*Brescia (25 concerns), Huron (16 concerns), and King's (30 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.

608 undergraduate concerns raised dealt with academic and/or financial concerns.

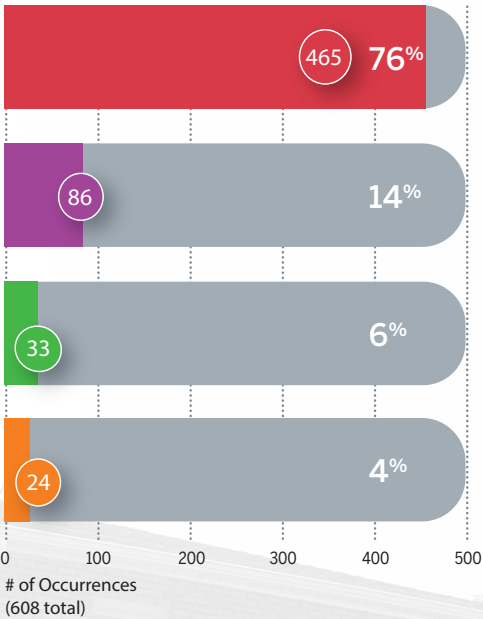
### Category of concern

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)





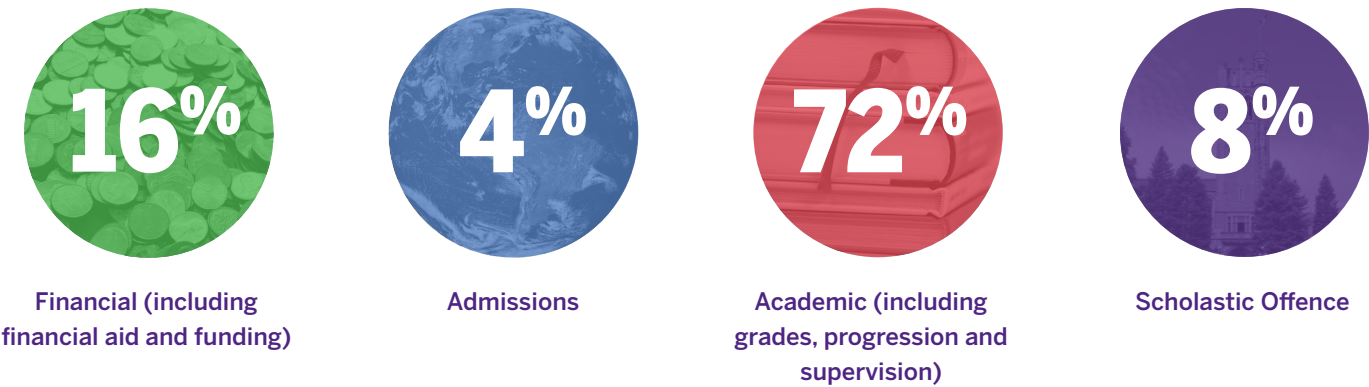


# GRADUATE STUDENT VISITORS

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.

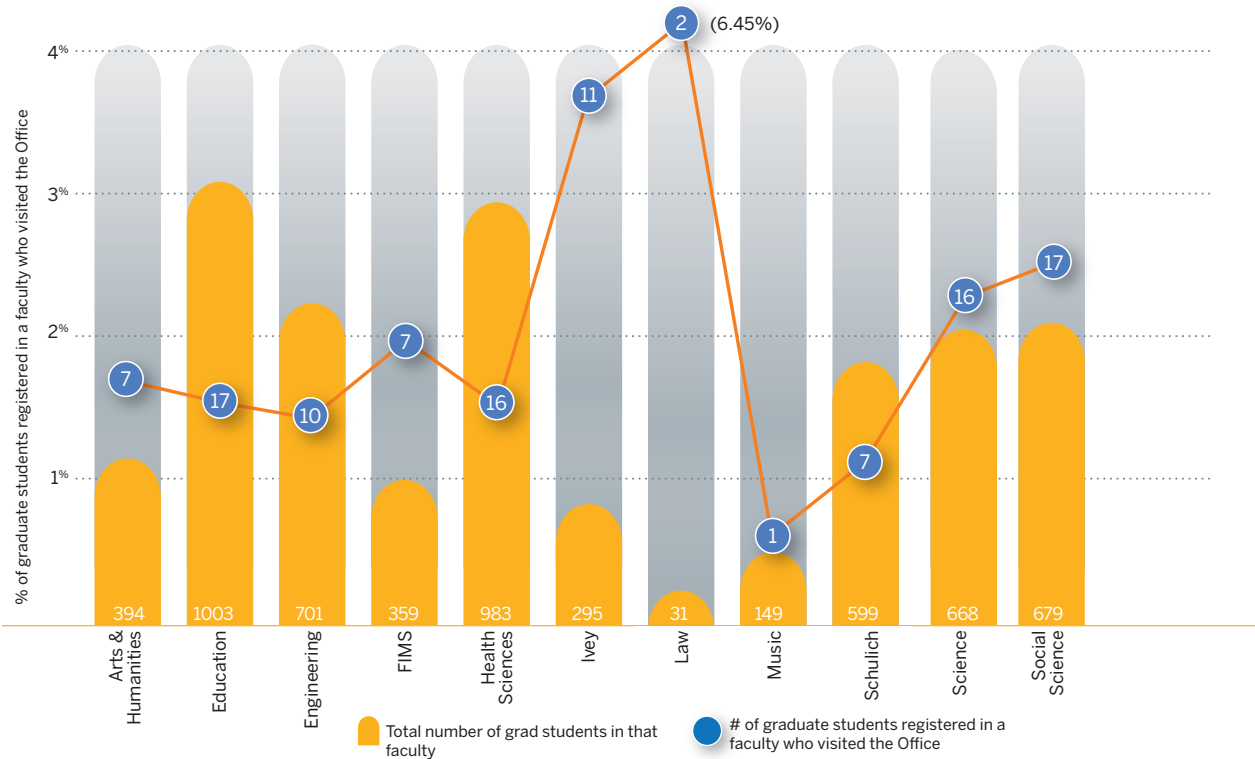
## Graduate concerns – academic and financial

(90 concerns raised by graduate students dealt with academic or financial concerns.)



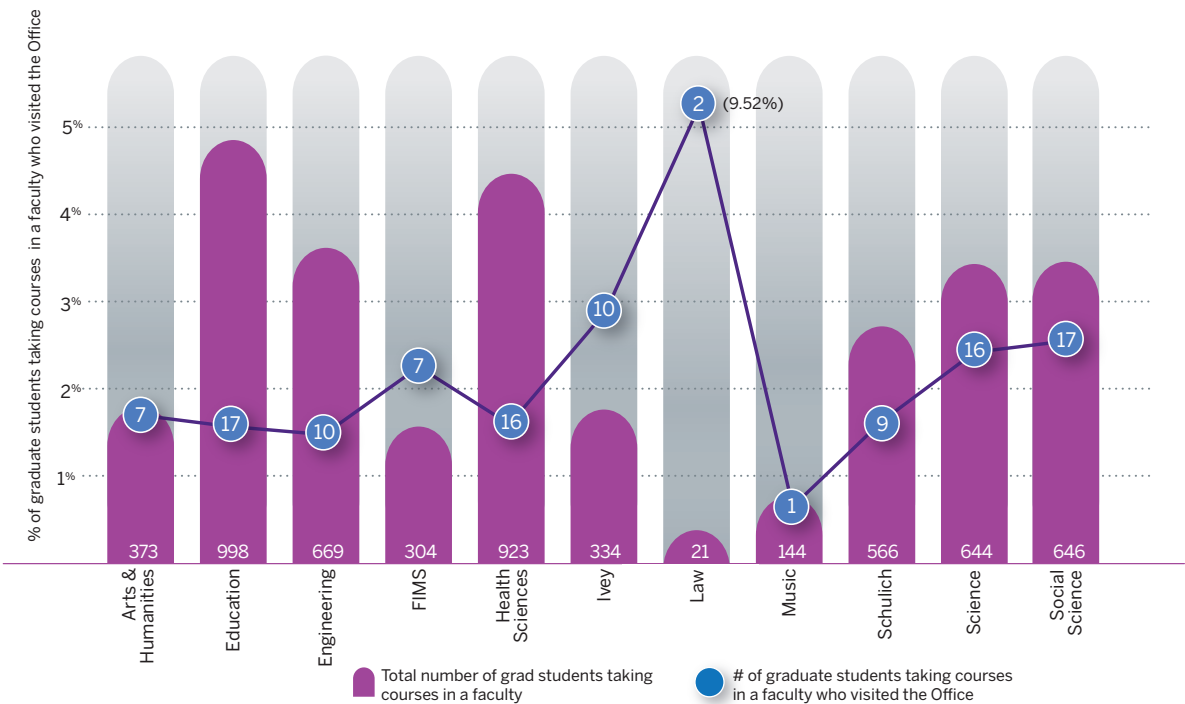
## Concerns per student's host faculty

The following graph illustrates the host faculty of graduate students visiting the Office. (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

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

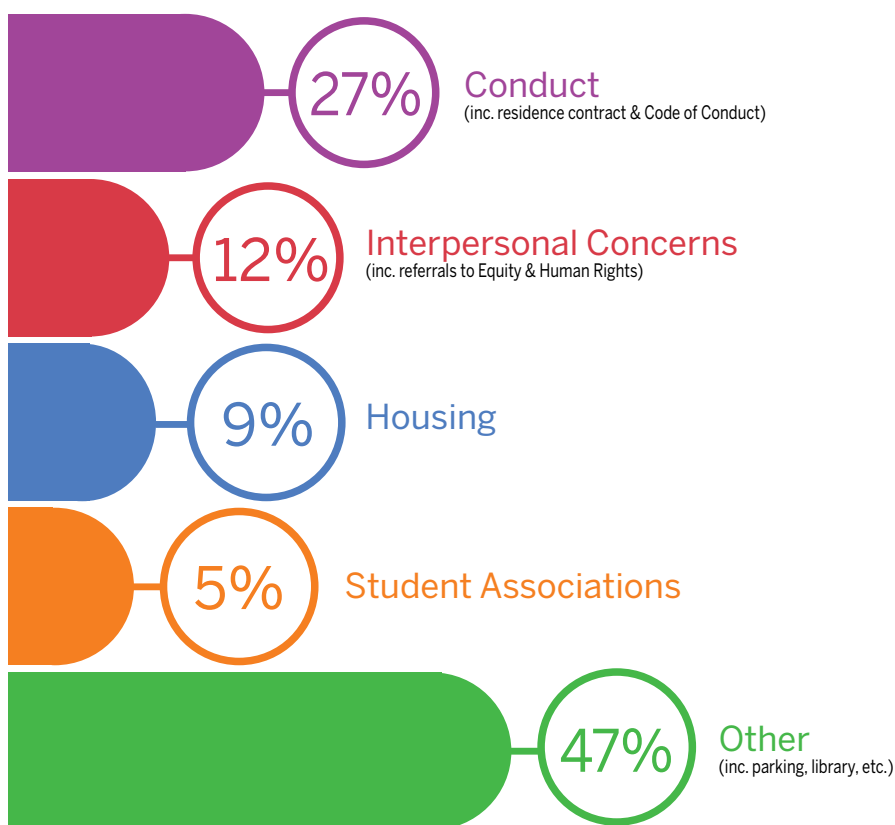




# UNDERGRADUATE AND GRADUATE NON-ACADEMIC CONCERNS

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 does act as an effective listener when a student wants to be heard.

As a % of total non-academic and financial occurrences (123)

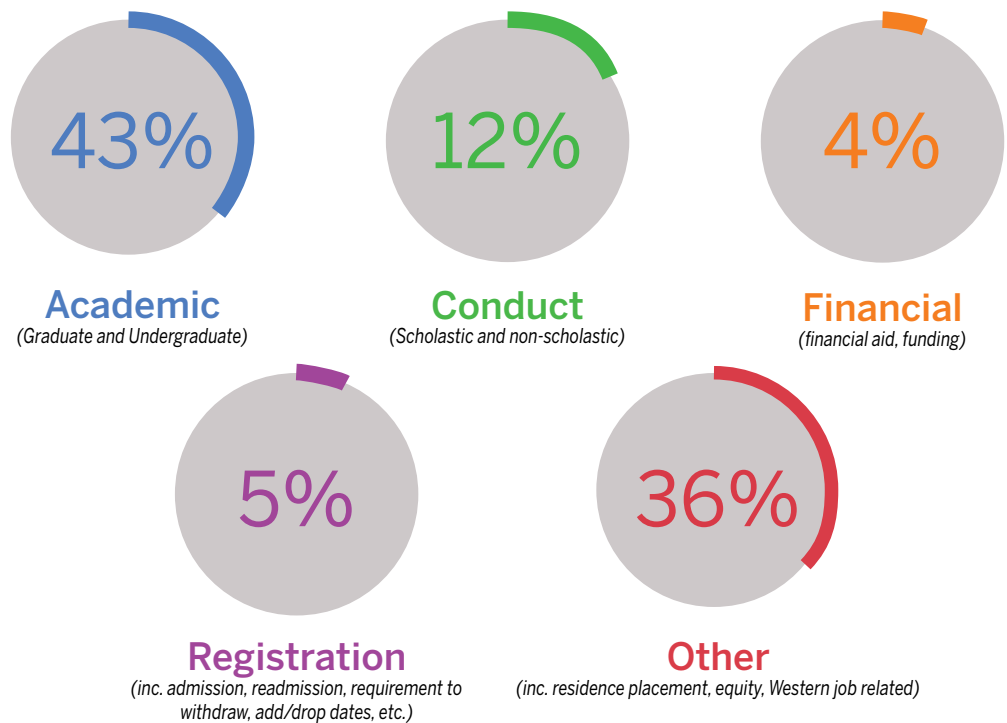


# NON-STUDENT DATA

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 administrators before they relay a decision to a student, and are always happy to tell a parent what a policy states and why a rule is in place. We do not discuss case specifics with parents unless we have the student's written permission.

In 2018/19 we heard from 82 administrators, staff, family members of students, and members of the public.

As a % of total non-academic occurrences (82)



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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](https://www.ipb.uwo.ca/documents/2016-17_Survey_of_Graduating_Students.pdf)



# GETTING THE WORD OUT

Ombudsperson Jennifer Meister and Associate Ombudsperson Anita Pouliot enjoy talking to students and decision makers about how they can guide students through their concerns. Following are the events we have been at in 2018/19:

## Outreach

SGS Amazing Race, stop on the race

SGPS Fall Orientation, booth

SGPS graduate student orientation, booth

Graduate Wellness Week, panel participant and booth

SGS International Student Orientation, booth

Workshop on Difficult Conversations, delivered to postdoctoral students

Welcome to Your Grad Club SGS Orientation event, booth

## Conference Participation/Attendance

Association of Canadian College and University Ombudspersons mid-year meeting, presentation

Association of Canadian College and University Ombudspersons/Forum of Canadian Ombudsman biennial conference

# WHO WE ARE

## Staff

The Ombudsperson and Associate Ombudsperson are the face of the Ombuds office, meeting with students and administrators to promote fairness at Western.



Jennifer Meister  
Ombudsperson



Anita Pouliot  
Associate Ombudsperson



# ADVISORY COMMITTEE

Thank you to the members of the 2018/19  
Office of the Ombudsperson Advisory Committee:

**Dr Angela Mandich**, Senate Representative

**Dr Ken Meadows**, President's Representative

**Mr Danny Chang**, University Students' Council Vice President

**Ms Mary-Blake Bonn**, Society of Graduate Students President

**Dr John Mitchell**, Affiliate College faculty representative (Brescia University College)

**Ms Hadia Fiaz**, Affiliate College student representative (King's University College)

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Nguyen, T. (2019). Reading, Writing and Resilience. Chronicle of Higher Education. Retrieved from: <https://www.chronicle.com/article/How-Colleges-Use-the/245773>

Appendix 1: Letter addressed to the president of each public college and university in Ontario. (2016). Retrieved from <http://www.ohrc.on.ca/en/learning-mind-inquiry-report-systemic-barriers-academic-accommodation-post-secondary-students-mental/appendix-1-letter-addressed-president-each-public-college-and-university>.

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