



Report on the SGPS Student Advisor program, June 2004

As employed members of the SGPS Student Advisor program, we would like to inform you of the significant progress made in the area of advocacy for graduate and professional students by our service since its inception in 2001. Before this program was initiated by the SGPS, there was no service designated for the advocacy of graduate and professional students. As we have found in the past three years, this service was (and is) greatly needed in the Queen's community. The primary reason for which we need such a service is due to the unique status of graduate students in the university community. We act as employees, students, teachers, assistants and mentors, and as such, students often find themselves in confusing situations where it becomes unclear which guidelines apply. We will explain the progress of the SGPS Student Advisor service in the past three years by listing some of the characteristics of the students we have helped, in addition to detailing some of the initiatives the Student Advisors have completed.

Graduate and Professional Student Clients

From January of 2002, when we first advertised for clients, at least 73 issues have been brought to the attention of the advisors. These clients have come forward with the following general problems (see Appendix for full client listings):

- Navigation of graduate/law guidelines and policies for various issues, 26%
- Professors/supervisors impeding student progress or otherwise violating Queen's University Code of Conduct, 26%
- Navigation of Queen's services for improvement of studies, 20.5%
- Academic appeal issues, 12.3%
- Questions related to withdrawing from Queen's, 6.8%
- Other graduate/professional students violating Code of Conduct, 5.5%
- Other issues or referrals, 5.4%

(Note that percentages add up to >100% due to some cases involving multiple complaint issues)

Graduate and law students have approached the SGPS Student Advisor service from a spectrum of departments across campus, with the following representations for each SGSR division:

- Division I (Life Sciences): 17.8%
- Division II (Humanities): 12.3%
- Division III (Engineering and Applied Sciences): 12.3%
- Division IV (Mathematics and Physical Sciences): 16.4%
- Division V (Social Sciences and Professional Schools): 20.5%
- Unknown: 20.5%

(Note that School of Business students were included in Division V and form the bulk of cases reported from that division)

Due to the complex nature of most complaints, the Student Advisors often refer clients to other campus or community services so that the needs or perceived needs of the student clients can be better met. The campus services most often referred to include:

- SGPS main office
- Human Rights Office
- Student Counselling Service
- Career Services
- Queen's Legal Aid
- Writing Centre
- School of Graduate Studies and Research
- Financial Aid Office
- Residence Services

Partnerships on campus

In addition to the many clients aided by the SGPS Student Advisor service, the Advisors have undertaken a number of programs and initiatives. In 2002, a partnership with the Ban Righ Centre was established which continues to include monthly drop-in sessions with themes tailored to issues experienced by graduate and professional students. At these drop-in sessions, students can feel free to anonymously express their feelings in an open forum, meet other like-minded students, and pick up information sheets on the topic of the month (which in the past has included stress management and funding information). More recently, a partnership with Career Services has been established, and Career Services and the Student Advisor service have jointly hosted a number of workshops tailored to graduate and professional students. The beginning of this school year also saw us build ties with the International Centre, with the introduction of the Student Advisor service to new international graduate and professional students during the orientation programs.

This academic year has also seen us strengthen our ties with the SGPS itself, in an attempt to remain abreast of issues being dealt with by our student governing body and thus better represent student interests and answer student inquiries. In addition to these continuing partnerships, the Student Advisors maintain close ties to other bodies on campus with whom we frequently work on client cases. These relationships exist with individuals at the School of Graduate Studies and Research, the Human Rights Office, the Office of Dispute Resolution, and the Secretariat's Grievance Advisory office.

Initiatives

In the past, we advertised the Student Advisor service via a mass advertising campaign, during which all new and returning students received information on the program and letters/pamphlets were sent to all graduate coordinators. More recently, the Student Advisors have launched a website with information about our service, the SGPS, and

general regulations and guidelines for graduate study at Queen's. This page is accessible by links on both the SGPS and SGSR webpages. In addition, we now participate in the Peer Services Group of the AMS in order to target law and graduate applicants with proactive suggestions regarding their research into potential supervisors and programs. Above all, we attempt to keep our service well advertised via monthly announcements of Ban Righ drop-ins both on campus, via email, and in the graduate newspaper, AntiThesis. AntiThesis also periodically publishes a student advice column the Student Advisors write based on common concerns or questions we hear.

One of the most important activities we have participated in this year was the introduction of the Student Advisors at the official divisional meetings of the SGSR, during which we were able to speak with graduate coordinators one-on-one in order to introduce them to our mandate and answer any questions they may have about us. We feel that this was important since the graduate coordinators in each department are most often the first contact for students, and their trust and knowledge of our service as an SGSR-supported service may lead to more effective referrals of students during the early stages of their academic issues.

Recommendations for the Student Advisor Program

Though this academic year has seen a great increase in the number of students utilizing the Student Advisor service (approx. half of the total cases handled by the advisors have occurred this year), we continue to encounter students and faculty who are unaware of the service. We thus feel greater exposure and support by the SGPS would be helpful in expanding the scope of the program. For instance, SGPS lobbying for a better location for our office space (for instance, in the space beside the SGPS office which is currently occupied by the AMS Communications office) would allow greater visibility and would increase the odds that students would drop by our office during open office hours to ask questions informally before issues become less manageable.

As for the administration of the program, there have been a few difficulties in the past, but the program has generally run smoothly since its inception in 2001. Though in the past minimal involvement of the VPIG of the SGPS has been the norm, we are seeing a movement in recent times towards greater involvement and guidance of the program. The main problem we have seen is related to the transient nature of the executive positions with respect to the Student Advisor positions; advisors are hired yearly in August, while exec are elected for terms beginning in April, and thus we deal with several different supervisory persons during our employment. In addition, the hiring of advisors in late September means that there are technically no hired advisors during the busy month of September, and in previous years the advisor hoping to be rehired did the position *pro bono* in the hopes that their contract would be extended. I suggest either a contract period of October to September, or a switch to the SGPS executive contract period of April to March.

In the future, the Advisors would appreciate continuing to be privy to updated information about SGPS activities and political positions are concerned. As far as

administration of the program on a yearly basis, we would like to see a move towards greater structure in the program in a few areas, particularly the writing of transition reports for incoming advisors so that they are aware of what their duties are, greater organization of training sessions for new advisors, and a clarification of Student Advisor contracts, duties and reporting procedures.

As you can tell from this brief report, the SGPS Student Advisor service has accomplished much in the past three years. It seems unfortunate that so many students have the need for advocacy and help in their studies here at Queen's. The educational experience here can be very rewarding in most circumstances, and by supporting students in their times of challenge, we hope to make the Queen's experience a rewarding one for all students.

Thank you for supporting the SGPS Student Advisor program, and please feel free to contact us with any questions or concerns that you may have.