

May 3, 2004

This third year of my term as a Student Advisor has been quite busy, with a constant client load and an increase in the services on campus collaborating with our service. So far this year, I have spent an average of seven hours a week in my duties as an advisor, slightly more than the contracted amount. It is my hope that, with some student cases coming to a close, the extra hours I have done will be used for the spring/summer term calm. For the purposes of this report, I have separated my activities into the following categories:

- Client interactions
- Ban Righ Gatherings and other interactions on campus
- General activities
- Recommendations

Client interactions

To date this term, I have handled a number of client cases, most of which were larger cases requiring a good deal of time. The client cases coming our way seem to be getting more and more complicated as time goes on, keeping us constantly on our toes and learning more about administration and policy at Queen's. In addition, there were a number of smaller cases for which some brief policy research and an email was enough to answer the student's question. These cases dealt with questions regarding maternity leave, funding and services available on campus.

The first major client I am dealing with is a returning client for whom I have been a committee member for the past two years in order to represent her interests in committee decisions. This client recently required some aid in lobbying the SGSR and her committee for additional funding, due to the fact that they asked her to complete additional work before submitting her thesis. The complicated nature of this client's case revolves mostly around the fact that the student is in the 7th year of her program, and thus funding is by no means guaranteed to her. Unfortunately, her committee had previously worked out a time line ending in April and promised to support her completion; their addition of workload which will keep her here into June was not considered in this agreement and there is now a lack of funding available to her to support herself and her child until she can finish her degree and take up her new employment. Because it is not the responsibility of the SGSR to support students directly in such cases, I have asked representatives on her committee to lobby the department to come up with some funding for this student, as she does not have a true supervisor. After consultation with Dr. Boegman, I have also advised her that a Thesis Completion Bursary might be granted to her, given her unique circumstances.

The second client I had the opportunity to work with this term was a student who had recently failed his Masters defense and was appealing to have the decision overturned. The student was denied this request upon speaking to both his supervisor and the department head, and thus the matter was taken to the SGSR informally. Dr. Boegman met with myself and the student, consulted with members of the department and thesis defense committee, and came to the conclusion that there were indeed questionable events and procedures surrounding the student's defense, and that he could redo the defense with a new committee without prejudice. The issue that I see as having precipitated the adverse events of this case involved mainly the supervisor's unrealistic expectations of a Masters thesis, his failure to communicate effectively with his student, and the department's failure to convey to the faculty of the department that there are regulations of the SGSR that must be followed in their duties as a supervisor. In brief, the case involved a student with a rather weighty 170-page MSc thesis whose supervisor had published the student's work without giving him credit, after which he allowed the student's thesis to go to defense when he clearly had issues with the quality of the thesis. Rather than mention his concerns on the SGSR documentation surrounding a thesis being submitted for defense, he asked one of his friends to act as an external examiner, and the two voted that the student fail his defense, rather than refer or pass him. I find it extremely disturbing that this case made it to the level of an informal appeal at the SGSR, and am distressed at the recurring theme I am seeing of departments blindly supporting the actions of their faculty regardless of the evidence of misconduct presented to them.

The third client I worked with this term was a student who had received what he saw as an unfair grade in a class almost two years ago. This case was detailed in my fall term report, and the case has since been closed after the conclusion of his formal Academic Appeal Board hearing. This student felt that it was unfair that there were no regulations governing the availability of marking guidelines for graduate courses, the administration of graduate course evaluations, or the processes of appeal for graduate level courses. I feel that at the graduate level, the nature of the professor-student relationship should be such that there is a free exchange of ideas with open communication. Unfortunately, not all situations are ideal, and I feel that it is for this reason that this student's case made it as far as it did. Had the professor or department been more open with the student (e.g. shown him his final exam and explained the marking scheme), I feel that the student would not have pursued this issue to a formal hearing, as I made it clear that there was little chance for his requests to be granted given that there were few procedural issues surrounding the situation. In addition, I found it disturbing that the department so overtly ignored the SGSR regulations regarding academic appeals and the two-week limits for responses between parties.

The final client who I am currently working with is a student who feels that her rights have been violated due to a lack of accommodation for her disability. This student has been working with representatives of Disability Services and the Human Rights Office in addition to myself. In turn, the representative of Disability Services has been working with the student's department head and graduate coordinator in order to determine what accommodations are reasonable within the scope of the program, such that the integrity of the educational process is not compromised. This is a fairly tricky case, in that it is

difficult to determine at what point a student's disability has been accommodated "enough." We have been working with the various services on campus, all of which are working to determine the answer as to whether this student is able to continue in the program given the constraints of her disability. At present, her informal appeal at the level of the SGSR has just been denied, and we are meeting with Dr. Singh this week to determine whether further actions are warranted or advisable.

Ban Righ Gatherings and other interactions on campus

This term, we held three gatherings at the Ban Righ Centre, with the themes this term including: "Communication effectively with supervisors and professors," "Submitting your thesis: Things you wish you had known," and "Resumes, cover letters, and job searching." The workshop on submitting a thesis was the most popular, with a great discussion occurring in which tips on surviving your defense were traded. The workshop on resume writing was parlayed into a recent workshop on preparing your curriculum vita for professional job-hunting, organized by Barry.

At the beginning of this term, the advisors attended the International Centre's orientation activities for incoming students. In the past, we had noticed a great deal of international students utilizing the advisor service, and it was our thought that targeting these students at orientation would allow them to realize that our service existed before problems became severe.

The beginning of the term also saw the advisors attending a number of SGSR division meetings in order to introduce our service to the graduate coordinators, who have the most interaction with students, as they are often the first faculty to be approached when a student has a problem with their program of study.

Near the beginning of the winter term, the advisors attended training by the Human Rights Office. Though this was my third time attending this training, I found it a good refresher for counseling and listening skills, and it was helpful to renew our relationships with the staff of the HRO.

The advisors also worked at strengthening our ties with the SGPS this term, attending several council meetings and communicating regularly with the office administrator and VPIG in order to keep on top of news affecting the SGPS.

General Activities

As always, the advisors have been keeping regular office hours every Wednesday, and are always available by email or phone. In addition, I have been regularly updating the Student Advisor website I implemented last term, and will soon transfer the website to SGPS webspace. A link to the site is currently found on the Current Students page of the SGSR website, and this is greatly appreciated! This term, I also designed the new advertisement page for the Student Advisor service for the SGPS's Grad Guide, the yearly planner given to students each fall.

This term, I also had the opportunity to represent the Queen's SGPS at the National Graduate Caucus meeting of the Canadian Federation of Students in Montreal. I found it to be an enjoyable experience, and was taken aback by the wide range of political views across the country from schools all voicing the same concerns from campus to campus.

Recommendations

Though the advisor program is running extremely smoothly this year, I must say that our jobs would be made much easier with the addition of a number of policy guidelines in the SGSR documents. Having these documents in hand would help greatly in cases where the department blindly supports its faculty. In particular, policy on the following areas would be of great help to students in graduate programs:

- Guidelines for academic appeals, in particular remarking by external experts in cases where another professor with expertise in course matter at Queen's is not available;
- Guidelines for individual graduate programs, such that students are aware of what the main goals of the graduate program are and where exceptions can be made for people in need of accommodation;
- Guidelines for the administration of graduate course evaluations, such that professors do not administer or collect the evaluations;
- Guidelines for the enforcement of policies already in place by the SGSR and the University.

Thanks again for your support of the Student Advisor program, and let me know if you have any questions or concerns about my report this term!