

# SGPS Student Advisor Annual Report

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## 1. Summary

As per the Basic Mandate stated in our Memorandum of Agreement, the SGPS Student Advisor program has continued to “provide students of the SGSR and the Law School with advocacy, general information, and support services with regard to aspects of academic and university life.” We have also “work[ed] with the signatory bodies and other offices on campus to recommend and promote policy change where necessary.”  
(See items 3, 4, 5, & 6 below.)

The months between May and August of 2006 were the busiest of the year, largely because of a number of complex academic appeals brought by graduate students, but also because of promotional, administrative, and communication aspects of the program.  
(See items 4, 5, 6 & 8 below.)

Student concerns overall this year fall into a broad category of wishing for more transparency and consistency in the ways that procedures and processes regarding their academic endeavours and employment issues are managed by their various faculties and programs. It has become clear to those of us in this office that there is a need for greater institutional standardization of various procedures, particularly the ‘informal’ steps of an academic appeal. Attached to this report is a copy of a motion written for the September SGPS Council meeting, which was passed.  
(See item 5 & attachment 6)

Use of our support continues to be overwhelmingly made by international, visible minority, and accented students, which suggests that committees such as the Coalition Against Accent Discrimination (CAAD) and Queen’s Coalition for Racial and Ethnic Diversity (QCRED) and related initiatives are excellent responses to the question of institutional racism and bias. Relatively benign measures such as standardizing some of the academic appeal procedures could have a notable effect on how international, visible minority and accented students see themselves as full and valued members of the Queen’s university community.  
(See item 5)

## 2. Schedule

Advisor office hours have changed from Wednesday afternoons to Thursday afternoons due to course and teaching timetable conflicts among the three advisors. We continue to rotate, bi-monthly, responsibility for responding to emails and telephone calls.

## 3. Caseload

The number of graduate students using the service seems to be on the increase; we currently have between 10-12 active cases in process, most of which should be resolved soon, and we are responding to an average of six emails and three calls per week, which is an increase from this time last year.

By far the bulk of time spent on cases this year has been in dealing with academic appeals made by visible minority students in the School of Business at Queen's. I have personally dealt with over 400 emails in the course of supporting two graduate students in their efforts to work through the informal stages of an academic appeal. Another supervisor has dealt with the third case until the end of her term, and it is likely that her email time is half of mine, meaning another 200 or so exchanges. Given that each email takes, in a conservative estimate, five minutes to read and reply, this constitutes about 50 hours of work, which is either one and a quarter months of an advisor's allotted September - April time, or two and a half months of one advisor's summer hours. This time spent does not include scheduling, preparing for meetings, meetings, and follow-up support for the students who are involved in the process of appealing an academic decision.

## 4. Communications

### A) Print

We have designed new standardized *Intake* and *Follow-Up* forms (see attached 1) and produced a new poster for the SGPS Student Advisor Program, (see attached 2) which has been distributed in large numbers to every faculty on campus, as well as in a number of public board sites. We are also in the process of hiring a graphic designer to undertake development of poster design for the *Coalition Against Accent Discrimination* (See item 5 and attached *Graphic Designer Needed* (3) ad.) We are also submitting work on a semi-regular basis to the graduate paper *Antithesis*, with our upcoming contribution to address the subject of Opt-Out Fees.

### B) Meetings and Presentations

i) Appeals-related meetings took an average of 18 hours per month for the months of April, May, and June, while research or consultation with others about the cases (The Human Rights Office, the Coordinator of Dispute Resolution Mechanisms' Office, a University Grievance Advisor, The International Center Student Advisor, The SGSR) has

taken about 20 – 25 hours in total thus far for two of the three cases, which suggests that the three appeals have taken, in addition to related emails, approximately 130 hours, or thirteen weeks of advisor term time.

ii) In January, we took part in the International Student orientation, welcoming students to Canada, Kingston and Queen's, informing them about the Student Advisor Program, and delivering a brief presentation on the academic culture at Queen's. As the vast majority of students who use the Student Advisor Service are international students or are permanent residents who speak English as an additional language, we have been making an effort this year to strengthen our ties with the International Centre and co-ordinate our efforts to address the particular needs and experiences of international graduate and professional students at Queen's. This has involved regular meetings with Susan Anderson, the QUIC Student Advisor. A copy of the report written by one Student Advisor for the Special Committee Report on the Survey of International Graduate and Professional Students at Queen's University is attached.(4)

iii) Advisor attendance at SGPS Council meetings, SGPS staff meetings, SGSR meetings, SGPS Advisor meetings and CAAD meetings has amounted to approximately 25 hours since the beginning of the Winter term to now.

## **5. Policy Development and Initiatives**

The Student Advisors participated in the development of materials to evaluate their performance. The evaluation form for the Executive to use in their evaluation of Advisors is attached.(5) Student Advisors developed forms for self-evaluation and did research into other similar programs' means of evaluation respectively. We intend to continue developing improved means of evaluation for annual purposes.

A motion was written by one Student Advisor and passed by the SGPS Council in September. This motion is intended to alleviate some of the factors that have made the graduate student appeals process so time-consuming and onerous for all parties involved. I have also been asked by the SGSR to suggest means by which departments might begin to standardize the informal steps of the process in the interests of expediency and fairness. (See 6)

The CAAD poster campaign is now being led by a subcommittee. Attached (See 3) is the ad used to find a designer. In addition to this campaign, a letter was sent from our office to Principal Hitchcock upon release of her Vision Statement about internationalizing the Queen's community, but we have not had a reply to our request in that letter for funds to expand our awareness campaign about accent discrimination.

## **6. Research & Works in Progress**

a) A proposal (See attached 7) has been informally approved by the President of the SGPS and we hope to find additional resources to carry out research into the availability

of employment for visible minority, international, and/or accented graduate students at Queen's.

b) Design of advisor evaluation – see item 5, above.

c) We are in the process of developing some kind of policy to address the subject of two-year Student Advisor terms, or one-year renewable terms – the learning curve for this position plus the costs in time and money associated with the beginning of one's work in this office seems to the advisors and the SGPS to warrant sufficient attention to evaluation to justify the possibility of two-year or renewable terms.

d) We are also in the process of formalizing a complaint policy, which states that student complaints about an experience with the Student Advisor program will be directed to the Vice President Internal, and failing satisfactory response, to the President of the SGPS. Students may make complaints in person, by email, or by letter. Thus far, we have had two student complaints this year, both quickly resolved by the Vice President Internal. Faculty complaints are to be made as are student complaints, with the exception that faculty complaints must be in letter or email in addition to or instead of in person. We have had no faculty complaints this year.

e) Suggestions for Division chairs who might wish to propose to their various faculties a more streamlined and consistent procedures for dealing with the informal steps of an academic appeal can be found in item 9, *Recommendations*.

## **7. Budget**

a) See SGPS Report

b) Increase in time spent fulfilling the basic mandate of the Student Advisor program:

### Hours Indicated in the 2005-6 Contract:

160 over four months, or 10 per week Winter

80 hours over four months, or 5 per week Summer

### Average hours for Winter and Summer semester 2006:

245 over four months, or 15+ per week Winter

128 over four months 8+ per week Summer

Difference: 85 hours Winter

48 hours Summer

The SGPS approved overtime payment to two advisors whose time spent over the Winter semester exceeded time stipulated in the contract.

c) The Advisor Program budget paid under \$100.00 for the services of a graphic designer to produce the office poster

d) The Advisor Program budget will pay approximately \$3000.00 for a new Mediation Training program which will be tailored for its purposes by St. Stephen's House of

Toronto, and will open space in the program for the Executive of the SGPS as well; see item 8.

## 8. Recommendations

- a. The difficulties this office has seen in the implementation of the informal stages of an academic appeal have resulted in the following ideas for expediting and smoothing the process. Suggestions for Division chairs who might wish to propose to their various faculties a more streamlined and consistent procedures for dealing with the informal steps of an academic appeal are:
  - With any failing grade that jeopardizes a graduate student's standing in his/her program, we suggest that each department ask the faculty member delivering the failing grade to meet personally with both the student *and* with the graduate coordinator to explain the reasons for the failing grade to the student. While it may seem that this process is too time-consuming to be reasonable, we would argue that the time invested at this point is very likely to save a great deal more time ahead, in the event of misunderstandings, conflicts, formal appeals, and so on.
  - The student should be given a short report *at* this meeting, perhaps no more than a paragraph or so, ideally in point form, to reiterate and clarify the substance of the reasons for the failing grade, and, *with* this report, a copy of the assignment, project, examination, etc., including the course weight of the assignment, the criteria and academic expectations of a passing assignment, so that the student and the graduate coordinator of the program can clearly see disparity between what was asked for and what was delivered.
  - This meeting should have the result of making clear to the student where his or her work has been found wanting, so vague criticisms should be avoided. 'Inadequate' or 'Poorly written' may clearly express a faculty member's judgment on a piece of academic material, but such terms do not tell a student how the judgments have been identified. 'Below average participation in the course' does not provide the student with clear understanding of what specifically constituted his or her poor participation.
  - This meeting should also provide an opportunity to discuss options consequently available to students. Some of these options might include:
    - a) A chance to re-do the assignment or coursework or examination.
    - b) A chance to re-do the assignment or coursework or examination after an agreed upon number of meetings between the student and the faculty member to foster development of the student's ability to improve his or her chances for success.
    - c) A re-evaluation of the student's failed work, by the original faculty member

- d) A re-evaluation of the student's failed work, by a disinterested third party, one agreed upon by both the student and the graduate coordinator.
- e) An option to re-take the course failed, if a course has been failed.
- f) An option to discuss a suitable alternative course to replace the course failed.
- g) A suggestion to the student that s/he withdraw voluntarily with no reference in the student's transcript.

There are no doubt be other options to consider, but in addition to whatever these may be, students should also be informed at this meeting of the details of an academic appeal. Ideally, a full information package with relevant material from the SGPS, SGSR, HRO and relevant Senate documents should be given to the student so that s/he is aware of options beyond the department.

In the event that the student deemed to have failed is a visible minority, non-dominant accented, international, or a self-identified member of a minority group, we suggest that prior to delivering the failing grade, the faculty member seek inter-cultural advice from any of the various offices at Queen's University that might provide valuable information about cross-cultural communications and cultural academic norms. It may be that the faculty member will find greater explanation for what appears to be inadequate work than an un-interrogated evaluation will produce. Since we know that to be treated the same is not necessarily to be treated equally, or fairly, it seems reasonable to take the time to understand possible factors that would at least justify the offer of an alternative option to the student.

Typically, as much as there is a typical, the second step in the academic appeal's informal stages is a student's meeting with the graduate coordinator of the student's program. If the issue has not been resolved by what results from the first meeting described above, it is safe to assume that the student's second meeting, where s/he and the coordinator meet alone, will be considerably informed by their shared understanding of the first meeting. Thus this second meeting will likely be briefer, more directed, and perhaps more effective than were the student required to explain his or her view of how the faculty member – student initial meeting devolved. It is at this point that all parties should be clear about what has happened, why, what the options are, why, what the next steps will be, and why.

9.2 May and June, although reduced to 5 hours per week, showed no signs of a decrease in the time needed to advise on cases, as well as to attend to the summer projects we had hoped to complete by mid-August. These include:

1. Given the regularity with which students come to us with financial concerns, to meet with the appropriate people at student awards and perfect this area of our knowledge – to date, we still do not have clarity about the disbursement of emergency funding to students in need.

2. To collecting estimates for costs of CAAD poster printing/distribution
3. To develop the CAAD speaker series in order to offer a once-monthly public forum, panel or guest speaker beginning in Fall 2006 on matters related to accent discrimination in the university
4. To continue revising in-house policies, and establish firmer policies in particular reference to data-collection, use, storage, and clarity regarding confidentiality.

There are additional tasks as yet to be allocated among us. But as another Student Advisor has noted in his winter report,

My only immediate concern at this point with the program has arisen in the last few weeks, and is that the summer hours (5 per week, per advisor) will likely be vastly inadequate to cover the rising volume of students that are contacting us as our profile on campus has risen consistently throughout the year. We have already had to cancel our weekly office hours, cut down on group meetings, meet with other university services or administrators one-on-one rather than as a group, and refer students having conflicts with their supervisors or seeking help with academic appeals to the University Secretariat or the Deans of the SGSR. Even so, all of us are finding it a struggle to work no more than five hours per week. While we are still able to refer students to these other options, we are not able to serve them as well as we otherwise could. It is possible that this may just be the situation for the months of May and June, and that things will get quieter as the summer progresses, but should the current rate of student inquires continue we may be forced to make more substantial cutbacks in our level of service.

I would recommend then that the hours of work offered to advisors be substantially increased; we have found that the increase granted in 2005 does not yet meet the needs of those who seek our support, and so more hours and/or additional staff are urgently required. Ideally, we would have one additional full ten-hour position throughout the year, and would have all advisors working ten hours per week throughout the summer as well.

9.3 There has been a lack of clarity regarding which cases coming to us constitute ones we should attend to and which should be directed to the Human Rights Office. The results of meetings with the SGSR has indicated that there continues to be some confusion over the idea that there are always clear lines to be drawn between academic appeals and human rights cases. This being so, it may be helpful for the SGSR to begin drafting a clarifying statement for student advisors, future clients and the SGPS Executive in which Senate's commitment to 'natural justice' and equity are understood as the foundation of a working relationship *between* the Student Advisor office and the Human Rights office, with both offices working together whenever necessary to see to the best interests of the aggrieved graduate student. We have, this year, relied a great deal on the HRO, and would like to continue developing this relationship since, in our experience, it is simply not always possible to split cases into one category or another

without jeopardizing the best academic *and* human rights interests of the graduate student.