

October 6, 2006

Student Advisor Annual Report

Introduction & Overview:

The student advisor program is jointly facilitated and supported by the School of Graduate Studies and Research, the Faculty of Law, and the Society of Graduate and Professional Students. This report covers the period between September 2005 and September 2006.

Several significant changes were made to the Student Advisor Program this past year. The most significant change was the increase in the number of paid weekly hours for Student Advisors from 6 hours to 10 hours during the Fall and Winter terms and from 3 hours to 5 hours during the Spring/Summer term. This involved a significant increase in funding to the program and it has had an enormously beneficial impact on the level of service we are able to provide to students. While the level of student demand for our services has more than kept pace with our increased hours, particularly during the early summer months, it is important to recognize that much of the Student Advisor Program's success this past year is due the increased financial commitment of the program's three signatory bodies.

My work as a Student Advisor has been immensely satisfying, and I believe that the program as a whole has been very successful this past year. We have assisted over one hundred students, and have done so with diligence, patience and professionalism. The Student Advisor Program has dramatically improved its advertising and promotional material and participated in numerous orientation events to raise the profile of the program among graduate and professional students. We have also met with representatives of various offices and campus services so as to develop a more complete understanding of the resources and options available to the students we serve. The Student Advisor Program has been instrumental in launching a number of important initiatives to promote the interests of more marginalized graduate and professional students this past year, including the Coalition Against Accent Discrimination and the International Graduate Student Standing Committee. We have also developed a variety of internal documents and policies to facilitate the more effective operation of the program; other such policies and documents are currently in process.

Student Files

The most important and time-consuming aspect of our work is responding to student inquiries. The great majority of our student inquiries are resolved by referring the inquiring student to the appropriate department office or campus or community service, or providing students with answers to their questions, after conducting research on their behalf. These sorts of inquiries are usually resolved within one to three days. While these are the most common types of inquiries, the bulk of our time and energy spent with students involves assisting a smaller number of students in addressing concerns or situations for which there are no other more appropriate services to which to refer them, or where such services are only mandated to

address their situation in a limited way. These more substantial and often ongoing files generally involve issues of student/supervisor conflict, and/or potential academic appeal situations (most of which are resolved at an informal level). These files may take anywhere from a few weeks to several months to resolve.

Depending on the particular circumstances, we often refer students in these situation to either or both the Human Rights Office and the Coordinator of Dispute Resolution Mechanisms. However, we will often offer to continue to work with the student ourselves in recognition of the limited scope of each of these offices' mandates (HRO does not conduct academic appeals or address matters where the conflict in question has arisen out of a cause other than a prohibited ground of discrimination; the Co-ordinator of Dispute Resolution Mechanisms is not mandated to advocate on behalf of a student).

It is the policy of the Student Advisor Program to promote self-advocacy. We strive to empower students with knowledge and strategic advice that they can use to address their own situations. We would always prefer to provide students with the resources they need to help find solutions to their problems; nonetheless, we have found that some students seem to require more active and continuing support. These sorts of students generally seem to be already somewhat marginalized in the university community, have few sources of outside support, and tend to be in situations where they are facing serious consequences, such as the requirement to withdraw. In these cases, where we find that a student does not have the resources, emotional or otherwise, to address their situation alone, we will take a more active role in assisting them. Such "active" assistance generally involves attending meetings with them and contacting other parties on their behalf.

It is also the policy of the Student Advisor Program to resolve matters at the most informal level possible. While always striving to resolve matters informally (I believe we have had only two matters the entire year that have made it to a formal resolution process), because of the 14-day limitation periods set out in the SGSR's academic appeal policy, we must occasionally advise students to engage the early stages of the academic appeal process so as to preserve those students' rights while they work at a (usually successful) informal resolution. While the need to meet these limitation periods often puts unnecessary pressure on informal negotiations, this appears to be unavoidable under the current policy.

The Spring-Summer term was marked by a dramatic increase in files involving student interested in pursuing academic appeals. Several of these files have turned out to involve a complex nexus of academic and human rights issues. A disproportionate amount of the Student Advisor Program's work hours in the last several months have been spent in the carriage of these files, particularly a small number that seem to be progressing towards formal resolution procedures. The carriage of these files has presented a variety of challenges for the Student Advisor Program. The amount of time required to assist these students has presented a challenge given the reduced Summer hours of the program; this may be understood both as a militating for the development of more aggressive forms of "client management," and a challenge to the signatory bodies respecting an possible increase in the allotted summer hours of the program to reflect student demand.

These files have presented additional challenges with respect to the way in which the roles of the Student Advisor Program and the Human Rights Office may overlap in a limited way while neither alone may be capable of addressing all of the circumstances facing a particular student for the reasons mentioned above. This has led to some confusion for all parties involved. We have recently held meetings with administrators and Human Rights staff to attempt to untangle and delineate the extent and nature of our disparate and overlapping mandates, and to discuss the roles we may each play in the various formal and informal dispute procedures. While these meetings have been helpful in developing a common understanding of the issues at play, they have also served to confirm that there are no simple solutions.

As there has apparently been some confusion on this topic, I would like to reiterate that any and all work done by the Student Advisors on a student's file is directed and initiated by the student in question. It is our clearly stated policy not to take any action on a file unless directed to do so by the student. While there are some directions we may receive from students that we will refuse to pursue (either because such actions would be obviously fruitless or even vexatious), we strive to be flexible and to assist students in taking the approach to a situation that is driven by the student. As such, we strive to accommodate students' desires to cooperate with other students in addressing their collective concerns, or to otherwise help them to raise matters of systemic concern. At the same time we advise students of the challenges and dangers of raising matters of systemic concern in an administrative environment that is often openly hostile to the mere suggestion that such concerns might exist. Nonetheless, it is our role to empower students, and we will attempt to assist them in their efforts in so far as we and they agree is appropriate in the circumstances.

Communication:

The Student Advisor Program deals with a wide variety of types of questions and concerns. As such, it is important for advisors to communicate with each other as regularly and effectively as possible and to be able to utilize all the resources available. Unlike previous years that were marked by internal conflict and confusion, I believe that this year we have met that challenge and that the internal workings of the Student Advisor program have exemplified the goals of cooperation and effective communication.

I found the other two student advisors an utter joy to work with this year. Both are incredibly reliable and professional in their work, and I have the utmost respect for their integrity, dedication and discipline. We have effectively and equitably shared the various advisor responsibilities and taken advantage of each other's areas of experience or special knowledge. I could not hope for a more mutually supportive group of advisors.

Our relationship with the SGPS Executive has also been very positive, as unlike previous years, this past year's executive has put significant effort into supporting and promoting the Student Advisor Program, expanding its scope and addressing our recommendations and concerns. A new SGPS executive was elected in April, and this new executive has maintained and further developed the relationship of cooperation and support initiated by the previous executive.

The Student Advisor Program has also attempted to cultivate a relationship with many of the various campus and community services available to graduate and professional students, so as to be able to more quickly and effectively refer students to appropriate service. We have met with representatives from the Human Rights Office, University Secretariat, SGPS Equity Committee, Career Services, Education Equity Program (Law), Centre for Teaching and Learning, SGSR Registrar, Student Awards, Health, Counselling and Disability Services, Positive Space Committee, Queen's Legal Aid, Town Gown, Ban Righ Centre, International Centre and other organizations.

The relationship between the Student Advisor Program and the Faculty of Law has been consistently positive and cordial. While we have yet to have a meeting with Assistant Dean Ready and all three Student Advisors, we did have several such meetings with former Assistant Dean Pooni during our initial orientation period.

The relationship between the Student Advisor Program and the SGSR has been generally positive throughout the past academic year, and the Deans of the SGSR have shown considerable interest in and support for the work of the program, and much important work was done this year with respect to updating the Memorandum of Agreement. Nonetheless, it is apparent that the issues raised in the recent handful of academic appeals have resulted in some strain on this relationship of cooperation and support. It is my hope that such challenges will be overcome, the lines of communication remain open, and that any existing tensions will not serve to undermine the important work of the Student Advisor Program.

Training/Professional Development

In addition to the orientation meetings we conducted with the various campus services listed above, we have attended a formal full-day training session delivered by the Human Rights Office. We also attended a 40-hour certificate course in mediation and conflict resolution delivered by the Mediation Centre of South-Eastern Ontario. Individually, advisors have attended various training workshops including diversity training, a multicultural skills workshop, and a workshop on how to be an effective trans-ally. A few weeks ago, the Student Advisors attended a training session with the Positive Space Program in order to make the Student Advisor office an officially queer-positive space. We have also recently met with the Registrar of the SGSR to receive further training on the finer points of the SGSR's academic appeal policy and procedure.

While most of our training has been very useful to our work and professional development, all three Advisors were thoroughly unsatisfied by the nature and quality of the conflict-resolution course provided by the Mediation Centre of South-Eastern Ontario (the reasons for this are discussed at length in my Fall Term Report). Accordingly, we have researched a variety of other options regarding this aspect of our training, and have recently made arrangements to have conflict resolution trainers from St. Stephen's House (a non-profit community mediation centre in Toronto) come to Kingston to deliver a two-day training session for the Student Advisors and SGPS executive. By arranging our own training session, we will be able to focus on the issues and challenges surrounding conflict resolution in the context of student advocacy in a post-secondary institution. This session will be held on the first weekend in November.

Advertising and Awareness:

Advertising efforts this year have included posters, e-mails, business cards, handouts, and presentations at various events. We made a presentation during the Faculty of Law's orientation week introducing the Student Advisor Program to new Queen's law students. We have also submitted regular "Dear Advisor" columns to the Antithesis, outlining the program and giving examples of common issues that people bring to us. We took part in the International Student orientation, delivering a brief presentation on the academic culture at Queen's, and we have also been involved in other orientation events during September 2006.

Over the course of the year we improved the quality of our promotional materials several times, and we now have a very attractive series of posters that we have displayed across campus. We also created an advertisement for the SGPS Grad Guide.

Initiatives:

It is part of the basic mandate of the Student Advisor Program to work with the SGPS, the Graduate School, the Faculty of Law, and other offices on campus "to recommend and promote policy change" so as to allow Queen's and the SGPS to better serve the interests of graduate and professional students (see *Memorandum of Agreement*, "Basic Mandate").

In accordance with this mandate, in addition to our many policy discussions with individual service representatives and administrators, we have launched a number of initiatives this past year. The most significant such initiative is the SGPS Standing Committee on International Graduate Students, that was initiated largely in response to the concerns of the Student Advisor Program regarding the marginalized position of many international graduate students. This committee was chaired by another student advisor who also worked closely with the Queen's University International Centre throughout the year, and was an invaluable resource to the Student Advisor Program with respect to the concerns facing international students. Given that the majority of the students who contact the Student Advisor Program are either international students or recent immigrants, her expertise in these issues was particularly helpful. A newly hired student advisor is also an international graduate student, and we hope that the program will continue to be enriched by the important perspective afforded to one who knows the international student experience first-hand.

Another initiative of the Student Advisor Program this past year has been the Coalition Against Accent Discrimination (CAAD). This organization was also launched as a response to the pattern of concerns facing the students who came to our office (for a more extensive discussion of CAAD, see my Winter Term Report). In January, CAAD prepared and submitted a policy paper to Principal Hitchcock for consideration in the university's strategic visioning process, particularly with respect to internationalization. CAAD has raised funds from a variety of organizations and is currently in the process of hiring a graphic designer to prepare a series of posters on the issue of accent-based discrimination.

The Student Advisor Program has also put considerable thought into how the academic appeals process might be improved to encourage the more expedient and fair resolution of academic disputes throughout the university. One student advisor recently prepared a successful motion to SGPS council regarding the need for clarification and some minimum standards of consistency regarding the informal stages of the academic appeal process across university departments. This student advisor is continuing to pursue and flesh out these recommendations in consultation with the Student Advisor Program, the SGPS and the SGSR.

The Student Advisor Program has also developed a number of documents and systems to improve the internal workings of the program. These include standardized intake forms and follow-up forms, advisor evaluation forms, and student surveys. We are also in the process of creating a small research library of university and departmental policy documents, a permanent policy respecting the rehiring procedure for advisors, an evaluation procedure that more effectively elicits feedback from student who have used the service, and a clear and appropriate procedure respecting complaints about Student Advisors.

Recommendations

Before presenting my recommendations for the Student Advisor Program, I would like to again emphasize the value of the changes made to the program already this year, particularly the increase in hours, the option for law students to opt-out of the summer portion of the position, and choice to bring the pay rate in line with that of a Teaching Assistantship. It is also a great boon to the program that two of the program's Student Advisors were rehired and will be able to continue to use their experience and training in the service of graduate and professional students.

The most pressing concern I have regarding the program stems from the bottleneck of cases that occurred in May and June. It seems that May in particular was our busiest month in terms of number and complexity of student inquiries. Unfortunately, this coincided with a 50% decrease in the program's hours. This resulted in a drastic cutback in our level of service (including a cessation of office hours, referral of students to other services not as well positioned to assist them, and an increased reliance on standardized email replies), as well as a considerable amount of overtime for the other two student advisors which was fortunately covered by a surplus in the Student Advisor budget. (I had another full-time job during the summer, such that overtime was not an option for me.) This means of addressing the level of demand in May and June is by no means an effective long-term solution. I also think it is reasonable to expect that the Spring will always be a busy time for the program as it is when many student receive their evaluations for the year's work. Ultimately, the optimal solution for the program would be an increase in funding to allow for more advisor-hours during these months, either through the hiring of another advisor or an increase in the hours of the existing advisors. Any solution would of course have to take into consideration the possibility that the law student Advisor may also not be present during these busy months. In the absence of another funding increase to the program, and assuming that overtime is not a continuing option, the Student Advisor Program should perhaps attempt (with the support of the steering committee) to reduce its hours at other times of year or increase the number of "vacation" days/weeks to correspond to the "overtime" during May and June.

I would recommend that the Student Advisor Program continue to develop and refine its procedures for addressing complaints against advisors. I envision a three-step process involving: first, the Vice President Internal (Graduate) of the SGPS; second, the SGPS President; and finally, if necessary, the Steering Committee as a whole. I would expect that complaints to the SGPS VPIG by students or faculty could be made informally and (for students) anonymously, but that as a complaint worked its way up the ladder it would be subject to an increasing requirement of formality, such that, at the very least, any complaint to the Steering Committee be made in writing and signed so as to facilitate its fair and proper resolution. I think it would also be reasonable to generally require a lesser degree of formality in student complaints than those from faculty or administrators, given the more vulnerable position of students in the university and the more limited resources at their disposal.

As I indicated above, it is a great benefit to the Student Advisor Program to have Advisors returning for a second term. The work of a Student Advisor is complex and immensely varied, and one does not really start to feel confident in the position until well into the Winter term. Every time the Student Advisors turn over there is a great loss in terms of expertise and institutional memory. This is particularly the case, when all three advisors leave at once, as occurred in September 2005. The development of a thorough evaluation and hire-back procedure will go a long way to ensuring that competent advisors may continue with the program and share the benefit of their experience. Ultimately, for the program to achieve its full potential, I would recommend the creation of at least one permanent Advisor position, possibly one with a basic supervisory or facilitative role. The continuity such a position would provide would ensure that expertise was effectively collected and passed down, and that positive working relationships were maintained with university offices and services. Barring the creation of a permanent position, which I understand is not likely at this juncture for reasons related to our funding structure, I recommend that we discuss possible ways to encourage future Student Advisors to remain in the position for multiple terms.

In addition to these recommendations, I would like to add my whole-hearted support to the recommendations presented in another student advisor's Annual Student Advisor Report respecting the further development of informal academic appeals procedures and the minimum standards graduate departments should adhere to when handing down academic decisions that may result in a student being required to withdraw.

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Jointly Supported by the Society of Graduate and Professional Students, the School of Graduate Studies and Research and the Faculty of Law

