

September 30, 2006

Student Advisor Annual Report (2005-2006)

I am one of the SGPS student advisors for the 2005-2006 academic year. I started my job as a peer advisor September 15, 2005 and finished it September 15, 2006. Since I have graduated I am not eligible to continue working as a peer advisor in this program as the two of my fellow advisors do. The one-year experience as an SGPS student advisor was very exciting and rewarding, sometimes pretty challenging too. In this annual report, I will summarize the main work I covered in the year, and the later some recommendations to this program.

As expected by the program, the advisors were supposed to work for ten hours per week in the fall and winter semesters, and five hours for the spring/summer semester. Generally speaking, it worked well, especially for the fall and winter, though sometimes there was some overtime due to big cases coming to our office. The time extension from six hours in 2004-2005 to ten hours in 2005-2006 based on the agreement among the three sides in the steering committee was very helpful, because it provided us time to do research on the clients' cases and work on proactive initiatives. Due to a very big case occurring by the end of winter term and went throughout the whole summer, the expected work hours in the summer was far from enough. It approved to be 7.75 hours per week on average in the spring and summer. Here I attach the monthly report from May to Mid September for your reference, and the monthly reports before May were submitted before with the Fall and Winter term reports. With the support of SGPS executive, the overtime payment was covered by the SGPS. However, by revisiting the strategies we approach extensive action cases like this, we may make effective referrals in the future instead of taking the whole responsibility by spending many hours on a single case. But as the same time, we need to keep in mind that spring/summer can be more busy than we imagined, since it is the time that students finished the winter exams and have their scores or feedbacks from professors. Usually, it is a period of time that students think of approaching student advisors if they feel that they are not fairly treated by the course instructors or graders.

My duty as a student advisor in the previous year mainly covered clients or cases; getting involved in committee, especially the specially the Special Committee on International Graduate and Professional Students (SCIGPS); getting involved in the SGPS executives by meeting related parties and giving suggestions on document draft and revision; advertising and promoting the student advisor program; participating in some activities initiated by the student advisors such as CAAD (Coalition Against Accent-based Discrimination), and professional training or development.

Clients / Cases:

I had inquiries almost every week, via emails, phone calls or drops by in our office hours. The nature of cases varies from consulting policies or regulation, students' rights or responsibilities, to complaining about unfair treatments or unhealthy student-teacher relations, and trying to appeal their exam results or other academic decisions. Some of the cases just needed short

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time to give information or refer to other offices if they are out of the direct mandate of our services, while others needed extensive time and efforts to do research and advocate for the students by talking with related parties and reviewing documents.

As I did in the fall term report, I will have another summary of the main issues of the cases I received in the previous year.

- Student-teacher relationship. This has been one of the biggest concerns in the cases I handled. Some clients expressed their difficulties in communicating with professors especially supervisors, which led to their decisions of changing supervisors or academic programs. Some clients felt confused on how to meet the expectations of professors, and wondered what their rights were when they had different opinions on their projects. Some students felt they did not get enough supports from their professors, and sometimes got unfair treatment from them. Usually in such cases, students wanted to know more about the policies at the university level. After informing them related rules or regulations, I often encouraged the students to open more space for communication and discussion with their supervisors or other professors in order to have possible solutions through an informal way.
- Complaints about academic decisions. I received several cases of complaints about academic decisions in the previous academic year, and the biggest cases I have ever handled as an advisor was about academic decisions. This kind of cases usually needed a lot of time for research and action. I have noticed that the cases from Ph D students were much more than Master's students, especially the comprehensive examination of Ph D students had a high proportion among all of such cases. Usually before they came to office, they already talked with some related parties and tried to find the way out, but did not manage to do that. This often made such cases difficult for the student advisors to deal with. When helping with students to approach their faculties or departments, I found that we sometimes had different understanding of the university policies, eg. academic appeal procedures, from staff or professors in faculties or departments. It seems that standard training on such issues will help to increase the agreement in interpretation such documents. I also noticed that students sometimes did not know what procedures they should follow to solve their problems within their programs, since such mechanism in faculties were pretty invisible.
- Besides the above two main issues, other requires from students included how to handle academic stresses, TA workload, health issues, program change, status change (from full-time students to part-time students), financial support, family emergencies, etc. The clients were from very diverse backgrounds. There were domestic students and international students or new immigrants. Some were mature students, some with disabilities, and some used English as their non-first language. As I mentioned in previous term reports, students from non-dominant cultures had a high proportion among all the clients.

Because of various natures of the inquiries, we need to work together with other campus resources in many cases, especially School of Graduate Studies and Research, Queen's Dispute Resolution Mechanisms, International Center, Human Rights Office, and Health, Counselling and Disability Services. Referring students to their offices, consulting and working together with staff in those services were the main forms of corporation. It proved to be very effective and helpful.

Committee Involvement:

The committee involvement was an important part of my duty in the past year. Besides the case advising, a lot of time I spent in this job was getting involved in the Special Committee for International Graduate and Professional Students ("Committee" as short later) as the Chair. The Committee was established in February 2006 following a proposed motion by SGPS executive. The purpose was "to investigate how international graduate and professional students are currently being treated at Queen's. Furthermore, the committee will be tasked with making recommendations to the SGPS Council, and other appropriate bodies at Queen's regarding how the plight of these students can be improved". From February to September 2006, the first committee had seven members from Africa, Asia, Australia, Europe and Latin America.

During the seven months, the Committee developed a "Mission Statement", identifying the main roles that the Committee will play. The essence is to improve the situation of international graduate and professional students. I had a complete description in the winter report, so I will not repeat it here. The Committee established a Yahoo Email Group as an information platform for all of its members. In March 2006, the Committee organized a SGPS International Student Round Table to discuss how to identify the needs of this group of students and meet those needs with people from different student services. After that, a survey on International Graduate and Professional Students was started.

All the Committee members got involved in the design and revision of the survey, with one of them as the coordinator. After discussion in the committee, we sent them to our advising members, several staff working in student services, for their feedback. At the end of April 2006, the survey was sent out to all SGPS members through our listserv to invite them to participate in this survey. A link to this survey was also posted in the SGPS website.

From late April to late May, 116 international graduate and professional students participated in the survey, which was around 1/3 of the all 337 SGPS international members. The analysis and writing was done in June and July, and then all committee members gave their feedbacks, and the final version of the report was finished in August. The report included analysis from the data, and suggestions based on the concerns raised by the participants. It was submitted to SGPS President and VP Internal (Graduate), Vice-Principal (Academic) Patrick Deane, Associate Vice-Principal & Dean of Student Affairs Jason Laker, Deans of the School of Graduate Studies and Research, International Centre, Human Rights Office, Centre for Teaching and Learning, QCRED, and other SGPS student advisors. The issues summarized in this report worked as a guideline for later committee members to work on.

Advertising and Awareness:

In the previous year, we continued to promote the student advisor program to all of the SGPS members. In the beginning of fall and winter semesters, I sent advertising messages to the graduate assistants of every department and they then forwarded to their graduate and professional students. By getting involved in activities organized by other services, I also took the changes to let more people know about this peer support program. For example, in the orientation organized by the International Centre in January 2006, we three were invited as special guests to introduce our programs to the new international students and encouraged them to get involved in SGPS by various means. Besides the student advisor program itself, we also launched some initiatives to raise the awareness of some important issues from our

perspectives. For example, the Coalition Against Accent-based Discrimination (CAAD) was aimed at raising the university members' awareness of the potential discrimination because of the non-Canadian accents.

Getting involved in some initiatives launched by other organizations or campus services was also a part of my duty as a student advisor, especially as an international student myself. QCRED was planning to start a peer mentorship program in which students can help and learn from each other, especially for students of visible minority. I had a talk with some QCRED members to inform our peer support program, and gave them my inputs. The cross-cultural counsellor at the Health, Counselling and Disability Services wanted to design a manual to improve faculty's sensitivity for the issues or concerns of international students, and I was in the discussion as well.

Training:

The training was mainly in the fall semester as the first step of our job. The biggest training was the Training of Alternative Dispute and Conflict Resolution offered by the Mediation Center of Southeast Ontario from September 30 to October 2 and from November 4 to 6. After that, I got my certificate for participation. The training offered some theories as well as practical strategies in the field of conflict resolution which we can use in our work. Other trainings mainly included transformation training from the previous advisors, and a one-day training the Human Rights Office. All of the training was helpful to improve our effectiveness in the work. With more experiences in advising cases, we felt more professional trainings are needed, such as the training with the registrar of the Graduate Studies and Research about procedure on academic appeal. We also felt that the training on the dispute and conflict resolution in university context, especially in the field of student services, was something we needed too. Such training must take the diversity issues under serious consideration. Such training was done, or will be done, among the current student advisors, since my duty as a student advisor was finished September 15, but I contributed to the discussion of improving trainings for the student advisors.

Correspondence with Advisors and the SGPS Executive:

It was a very good environment working in this student advising team. My two colleagues were both very professional, enthusiastic, and supportive. It was a great pleasure to work with them. From different backgrounds, we brought our unique perspectives to our working place and shared with each other, and as the same time were very open and respectable to something we might not totally agree with each other.

In terms of correspondence with the SGPS Executives, as I mentioned in both of my fall and winter reports, it was very encouraging. First of all, the Executive paid a lot of attention to the well-being of this program by regularly meeting the advisors, and inviting us to get involved in revisions of some important policies or other documents. Second, they were very supportive to the diversity issues among the SGPS community as well as the Queen's community at large. For example, they launched the Committee for SGPS international members, they showed great support to the CADD initiation, they approached the increase in UHIP (University Health Insurance Plan, which all international students have to pay) premium with the Committee, and they helped the Committee to build ties with AMS so as to work more effectively on issues about international students.

Recommendations:

I was very fortunate to have the opportunity to work in the student advisor program. I believe that students got some information and help from our work. Since we made some efforts to improve the program whenever necessary in the previous year, I do not have much to recommend for this program at this moment. Here are the two points that I think may need some further consideration.

First, the role of student advisors, especially in some big academic appeal cases. Actually, this is something we should be very clear with, because it is a basic element in for our job. Unfortunately, it was not this case, and I found that this is also the concern of the advisors before us. Do we just provide students with some information service or help them to locate the proper places they should go or should we act as their advocacy in some big "action cases"? We found that the workload with cases like academic appeal was very high, and it was sometimes even equivalent to that of a full time staff. This is not possible for student advisors to deal with. When we tried to refer these cases to services like Queen's Legal Aid, they did not accept them. Then where do the students go? And what should we do with them? This needs a clarification for the role of student advisors in such cases. If being the advocacy of students in each big case is impossible due to time constraints, SGPS needs to find an effective mechanism that can meet students' needs when such cases happen.

Second, a feedback system needs to be built in order to help the program grow more healthily and provide better services for students. Actually, such issues have been discussed in the last meeting of the advisors with SGPS VP Internal (Graduate) before my ending of the duty, and some suggestions were raised in the meeting too. I pointed it here again, because I think it is important for the program's development in a long term.

Thank you for your time in reading this report.