

May 28, 2006

Student Advisor Winter Term Report

This report includes the activities covered through January 2006 to April 2006, the winter semester.

Generally speaking, the winter semester was busier than the fall one. The time has been mainly devoted to individual client advising, and committee involvement (The Special Committee on International Graduate and Professional Students). In addition, advertising and awareness, correspondence with the other student advisors, SGPS executive members and staff from related resources was also a part of the job covered in the winter.

Clients:

For the winter semester, the number of clients I have helped was similar to that in the fall semester, but there were some big "action cases" that needed extensive time, efforts and commitment. After working for already three and a half months, I have got some experiences and more competence when dealing with the various inquires. In addition, because we have established good relationship since last semester with the related recourses on campus especially School of Graduate Studies and Research, Queen's Dispute Resolution Mechanisms, International Center, Human Rights Office, and Health, Counselling and Disability Services, and have got good knowledge of what the services do to assist students, it helped me easily locate and refer to more proper resources when I felt the students needed other supports besides ours. I found all the resources were extremely supportive and helpful.

Among all of the inquires, the issues on the conflicts between students and their supervisors was still very outstanding similar with what was mentioned in the fall term report. For some Ph D students, questions on comprehensive exams were asked with a high frequency. Complaints about unfair academic decisions on the comprehensive exams, course tests, and other kinds of evaluations were raised in several cases. Other issues covered from academic stresses, TA workload, graduate students' health benefits, and so on. The two biggest cases were both related with the teacher-student conflicts and therefore the students felt treated without respect and ended in poor evaluation on academic performance. One case was solved with satisfaction with the help of related parties, and the other is still undergoing at the moment. I have noticed that the teacher-student conflicts, especially the conflicts between supervisors and students influenced the students' performance to the extent beyond my imagination. Because of the power relations between the two parties, some students tended to be very hesitant or even intimidated to talk with the supervisors about their concerns, and therefore the communication channel was blocked. I cannot generalize on what group of students this kind of conditions more likely to happen, but the student I helped with from a non-dominant cultural group clearly showed great hesitance.

As mentioned more than once before, the majority of clients this term were still from the non-dominant cultural backgrounds, whether international students or visible minority.

Committee Involvement:

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

The committee involvement was an important part of my duty in the past winter term. In light of the particular nature of some concerns of international students in Queen's graduate and professional community, SGPS proposed a motion to establish a committee to work particularly for this group of students. The motion was approved by the SGPS council meeting in December 2005, and the committee was officially established on February 3, 2006 with seven committee members from Africa, Asia, Australia, Europe and Latin America, all international graduate and professional students. I am the chair of this committee.

- **Mission Statement**

Based on the mandate statement in the motion "This committee will be 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" and discussion of the main concerns of international students among the committee members, our mission statement has been developed as below:

We will serve as a liaison between the international graduate and professional students and SGPS and the administration of Queen's University; we will function as the voice for international students' needs and concerns and lobby Queen's University with SGPS to meet and fulfill these needs. We will seek to provide international students with information that can better assist and enhance the quality of their lives in Queen's University and we will serve as a forum for discussion, activism and socializing among international students. We hope to provide international graduate and professional students a space in which they can meet each other and share their unique issues and concerns; we will also highlight the contributions of international students and promote the visibility of this international graduate and professional students' community.

- **Establishing a Yahoo Email Group**

Considering the fact that many SGPS international members do not know how to approach the resources they can use when facing difficult situations in their studies and lives, we have established a yahoo email group for international graduate and professional students. This is a forum where the committee members can post related resource information regularly and publicize activities particularly interest international graduate and professional students. Through this E-mail group, students can also exchange information and seek help. Every SGPS international member can join this email group.

- **SGPS International Student Round Table**

As stated in the SGPS council motion to establish this committee, investigating how international graduate and professional students are currently being treated at Queen's is a mandate of this committee. At the same time, all the committee members agreed that unless we have a better understanding on what the international graduate and professional students' main concerns are, can we work more efficiently with a better direction. Therefore, we organized the SGPS International Student Round Table on March 2, 2006. Both students and people from various campus resources who often worked with international students came to the round table. International students' main concerns and special needs were extensively discussed, and recommendation on how to improve the campus resources to better assist international students were also raised based on cooperative brainstorm.

- **Survey on International Graduate and Professional Students**

This is the second step to investigate the situation of international graduate and professional students at Queen's community. Based on a pilot small range survey from the round table, tuition fee, financial assistance, relations with supervisors, and housing appeared to be the main concerns of many participants. Based on the finding of this pilot survey, we developed a more detailed survey and invited all SGPS international members to participate. The survey was sent out to every SGPS member at the end of April, and the data collection has been finished on May 27 with the participation of 126 international graduate and professional students. The analysis will be started at early June and the report is expected to be finished by early July. This report will cover main concerns and needs of this group of students, and the suggestions on how to improve the recourses in order to better support this group of students and to improve their situation at Queen's community.

Advertising and Awareness:

Like what I did in the fall semester, in the beginning of the winter term, I sent an advertising message to the graduate assistants of every department and asked them forward it to their graduate and professional students. As the same time, I asked the members in our committee to post our new posters in the public boards in their faculties or departments in order to promote the program as well. In January, we three advisors attended the winter orientation organized by the International Center. We took this chance to introduce the peer support program to the new-coming students and answer their questions.

At the end of the January, I attended the semi-annual meeting of Canadian Federation of Students (CFS) as an international student representative. In the meeting, some issues particularly about international students at Canada were discussed, and I raised some recommendations to improve the situation of international students studying in Canadian universities.

In the winter semester, the student advisors launched Coalition Against Accent-based Discrimination (CAAD) which aimed at raising the university members' awareness of the potential discrimination because of the non-Canadian accents. I attended the regular meetings. The cross-cultural counsellor at the Health, Counselling and Disability Services was going to develop a manual to improve faculty's sensitivity towards the issues or concerns particular for international students, and I got involved in as well by giving my inputs. In the workshops offered by CTL (Center of Teaching and Learning) to help with professors' supervision and work with students, we are going to develop a brief summary to mention the main concerns from our advising experience with students in the past and try to offer some points that we think might be helpful for professors' understanding of the students' needs and concerns. The work will be finished in the summer, and some preparation work has been done in the winter term.

Correspondence with Advisors and the SGPS Executive;

The working relation among us three advisors was still very positive, full of understanding, mutual support and cooperation. With different expertises we brought into the working setting, I felt it was a really healthy mixture of knowledge, experiences, and perspectives. I am happy that they were both rehired for the next year, and I believe that they will continue doing excellent jobs and contributing to the student advisor program. I am going to graduate this year and not

equitable to stay as a peer advisor and a new advisor will join our team, and I believe that the good relationship will be kept and everyone will enjoy the new team as well.

In the winter semester, SGPS Executive kept paying a lot of attention to the Student Advisor program, and showed great support to the launching of CADD project and the initiated the Special Committee on International Graduate and Professional Students. We were encouraged to get involved in the finalization of Memorandum of Agreement of the Student Advisor Program and policy and procedures of academic appeals. I was particularly impressed with their attention to the issues on international students in the SGPS community, and the establishment of the special committee really opened a channel through which the concerns of this group of students could be better heard and addressed. With the new SGPS executive since April, I can see the continuing efforts for the improvement of the advisor program and international students' situation. Rosa paid a lot of attention in the future training for advisors, and Andrew tried to help the SGPS international student committee build some ties with AMS so that the issues of international students can be better solved with the joint efforts. The increase in UHIP (University Health Insurance Plan, which all international students have to pay) and tuition fee for international members of SGPS were also addressed by the executive at different settings. With the work of the former and current executives, the advisor programs has got a very positive change in some aspects, such as the policy that at least one international students should be hired as the student advisors, I believe this means great encouragement for international students' participation in the working system of the SGPS and the university at large.

Recommendations:

I really enjoyed the student advisor program, and I felt that students got some information, advice, help and support from our office. I do not have much recommendation for the program itself at this moment, and one point that I am thinking of deserves to be mentioned here, though it may not a very proper place.

From the winter term till now, we were and are dealing with three cases from the School of Business, and all of them are big ones which need extensive time and efforts. This is unusual for our advising work. When so many complaints come from the same faculty or department, I think it really means something, and deserve attentions from our office and SGSR. At the same time, we have found that the school intended to refer the students to our office without first sufficiently informing the students the basic policy and procedure of the academic appeal in both informal and formal ways. I think letting students know what they can do with an academic decision should be one of the mandates of individual faculties or departments. Just referring students to our office without any efforts to try to solve the problem increase a lot of our workload, especially in the summer when we have only 5 hours a week. I don't know whether the faculties or departments have some mechanism or people who can take care of such cases, but I think such kind of service would be very helpful for the conflict solution. Another thing is that many students are not informed their rights of launching an academic appeal or having other options on time when they feel they are unfairly treated for their performance. The result is that the case has already got very serious or very messy when it comes to our office. It could be easier solved if taken care earlier. I don't know whether some extra work should be done in this program itself or SGSR can help the departments or faculties raise the awareness of such responsibilities.

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Thank you for your time and support to this program.

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

