

September 28, 2007

## **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. As you are aware, this year the Faculty of Law withdrew from the administration of the program and set a schedule for the graduated withdrawal of its funding for the program. The SGPS has increased its financial commitment to the program to make up for this impending funding shortfall.

My work as an advisor officially began in September 2005, and I was rehired as a Student Advisor for the 2006/2007 academic year. I have now been rehired again and will continue to work as a Student Advisor for the current academic year of 2007/2008. This report covers the period between September 2006 and September 2007.

Overall, the Student Advisor Program this year has been dominated by two trends: increasing effectiveness in the positive and expeditious resolution of student concerns (attended by increasing support from students generally), and decreasing support from our administrative partners. I will address both of these trends in this report.

While an effective means of tracking the various types of inquiries we receive and respond to has not yet been fully developed, it is clear from our email records that we have assisted well over one hundred students this year. While we have not always been able to help students obtain the precise answer or outcome they want, our clients have nonetheless been overwhelmingly satisfied with the level of service that the program provides. This has been particularly true with respect to those students to whom we have provided more ongoing and intensive assistance.

Unfortunately, concerns of international students who feel they have suffered unfair or abusive treatment from faculty members remain the dominant issues faced by the Student Advisor Program. It is my understanding from speaking with previous advisors that this has been the case as long as the program has been operating. Absent both a serious institutional and grass-roots effort to eliminate these abuses, this situation is likely to worsen before it improves.

### **Training/Professional Development**

As part of our training as Advisors we attended orientation sessions with the various campus services listed above, as well as transition orientations with the outgoing advisor and with the incoming and outgoing VPIGs. Formal training included a 15 hour Conflict Resolution Skills training conducted by St. Stephen's House (a non-profit community mediation service in Toronto), a full-day Discrimination & Harassment training conducted by the Human Rights Office, and an SGSR appeal policy training with the registrar of the SGSR. We also attended various other training workshops including diversity training, anti-racism training, the positive space program, and an information session on the application of FIPPA to the university context. The SGPS executive attended the conflict resolution training with us, and everyone was very impressed with this workshop and we greatly benefited from the skills learned. Given the difficulties the Student Advisor Program has had in previous years obtaining appropriate training services in this area, this was a major positive development for the program this year, and we have invited St. Stephen's

House to return on an annual basis to deliver the workshop. What was particularly helpful was the degree to which they were willing to work with us in advance to develop an understanding of the role we play in the university and the types of situations we commonly encounter. They designed the workshop very precisely to fit our needs and to be relevant to our institutional context. Thus, while this 15-hour workshop has replaced the former 40-hour workshop, we were able to develop our skills more effectively at the new workshop because of its direct relevance to our work.

### **Advertising and Promotion**

Over the course of the Fall term we distributed recently updated posters throughout campus. In the Winter term we created a second series of posters that addressed a wider range of common issues that students have brought to us, including financial difficulties, supervisor conflicts, academic grievances, and intellectual property questions. We also updated the Student Advisor brochure, developed a radio advertisement for CFRC, and prepared a multi-page advertisement for the Grad Guide.

We had a referendum in the Winter term to raise the student fee (from a \$3.00 optional fee to a \$6.00 mandatory fee) in light of the Faculty of Law decision to de-fund the program. We took the process of referendum preparation as an opportunity to carry out a major publicity blitz for the program. We spoke and made presentations at multiple SGPS Council meetings, at graduate level department meetings, as well as at various workshops and forums. We created, printed and widely distributed the new series of posters advertising the program. The audio advertisement that we developed now plays regularly on campus radio, CFRC 101.9 FM.

In January, we prepared and delivered a two-hour workshop for graduate students on managing the student/supervisor relationship and developing effective communication strategies. The workshop was well-attended, beyond our expectations, and was much appreciated by the students. A number of students in attendance have since approached the Advisor Program for one-on-one assistance. Given its success, we are hoping to continue with a variation of this workshop in future years.

While our publicity campaign was effective, we believe that there is still much work to be done in this area. Many of the people we spoke to during the campaign were either previously unaware of the program or did not fully understand the nature of our service. On the other hand, we are already often functioning at maximum capacity with respect to the number of ongoing files we are able to handle effectively. While we would easily be able to manage an increase in inquiries requiring summary advice or referrals, a significant increase in the number of larger cases, requiring ongoing advisor participation, would be difficult for the program to handle at current capacity. Nonetheless, program awareness is on the rise and the level of support for the program among graduate students is growing rapidly as it is increasingly recognized as one of the very few independent resources available to graduate students who feel they are not being treated fairly. In the current non-union context, graduate students have very little power to negotiate the terms of their employment or address non-academic and non-human-rights grievances without fear of retaliation. The advisory and advocacy services we offer to graduate students are necessary to help address abuses or other derogations from university policies or values that could otherwise go unchecked in this context.

### **Communication & Stakeholder Relationships:**

Over the course of a year the Student Advisor Program encounters many different 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 available knowledge and resource. While our

general level of cooperation and coordination was high this year, improvements could still be made in this area. To address this concern we have decided to hold monthly Advisor meetings as well as monthly meetings with the VPIG during this upcoming academic year. More frequent meetings with the VPIG have become particularly necessary in the context of the ongoing pressure to change aspects of the program from some members of the steering committee.

The Student Advisors' relationship with the SGPS Executive has remained very positive. This past year's executive has put significant effort into supporting and promoting the Student Advisor Program as well as protecting its institutional independence and advocacy mandate. The executive also assisted us with a major publicity campaign that accompanied a successful referendum campaign to increase the program's student fee. A new SGPS executive was elected in April, and this new executive has continued to support the program with similar enthusiasm.

The Student Advisor Program has also striven to maintain a positive 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, Education Equity Program (Law), 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. Now that we have recently hired two new Advisors, I am looking forward to a fresh round of orientation and training sessions that will allow us to reinvigorate those connections.

The relationship between the Student Advisor Program and the Faculty of Law changed dramatically this year, beginning with the faculty's advance notice that it was considering withdrawing its financial support for the program due to the duplication of services provided by the Education Equity Program. In response to this notice, considerable effort was put into persuading the Faculty of Law to maintain its support for the program. This included meetings with the LSS, the Education Equity Program, and the preparation of a special report for the Dean. In the end the faculty opted to withdraw from the program on a graduated schedule, providing partial funding for the academic year 2007/2008, and withdrawing completely in September 2008.

The relationship between the Student Advisor Program and the SGSR has dramatically deteriorated over the course of the past academic year. Low points included an unsubstantiated written complaint lodged against an individual advisor by an Associate Dean of the SGSR, and a series of informal such complaints made to the executive of the SGPS over the course of the year. Ongoing disagreements regarding the status of existing departmental practices in the context of individual student cases, led to accusations from members of the SGSR that the program was misleading clients. These ongoing disagreements have been accompanied by increasing efforts on the part of the SGSR to narrow the mandate of the program and to assume greater control over its operations, particularly with respect to personnel. As the independence and advocacy mandate of the Student Advisor Program remains a high priority for the SGPS executive, these efforts have as of yet been largely unsuccessful. Nonetheless, the ongoing threat of the one remaining administrative partner to the program withdrawing its funding has had a powerful chilling effect on the relationship between the advisors and deans of the SGSR, even with respect to the most recently hired advisors. It is unlikely that this relationship will begin to improve until the SGSR until any threats to the institutional independence of the advisors or financial support for the program have come to an end.

## **Student Cases**

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 Coordinator of Dispute Resolution Mechanisms is not mandated to advocate on behalf of a student).

The Student Advisor Program encourages self-advocacy. Our goal is to empower students with the knowledge and strategic advice that they can use to address their own situations. We always prefer to provide students with the resources they need to help find solutions to their problems, rather than to become directly involved. 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. These student are usually international students and/or mature students in the "hard" sciences or the School of Business. 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. Given our limited resources and person-hours our capacity to provide such assistance is limited, and reserved for only those who need it most.

The bulk of our file work consists in advising students how best to advocate on their own behalf in a given situation. This involves, first and foremost, validating student concerns at an emotional level and providing students with the support required to put their situation in perspective so that they can rationally and effectively respond. It often involves developing and imparting a sophisticated understanding of university policies at various levels (including an understanding of how those levels interrelate), discussing strategic considerations and the (often limited) range of possible remedies, coaching students on approaches to communication and conflict resolution, and advising students of the possible consequences (official and unofficial) of their actions or choices.

It is also the policy of the Student Advisor Program to resolve matters at the most informal level possible. While this approach results in a more efficient use of program and university resources, the most compelling factor militating in favor of informal resolution is the wider range of available remedies. While we always strive to resolve matters informally, we nonetheless ensure that students are aware of their right to access formal resolution procedures. Furthermore, because of the mandatory deadlines that are involved in accessing some of these formal processes (e.g. the 14-day periods set out in the SGSR's academic appeal policy), we must occasionally advise students to engage the early stages of a formal process so as to preserve those students' rights while they work at a (usually successful) informal resolution. While the need to meet these deadlines may put additional pressure on informal negotiations, it is essential that the deadlines be met in accordance

with the purpose of seeing that disputes do not drag on longer than necessary (particularly as students may be left in academic limbo pending resolution).

The vast majority of the program's clients who approach us with serious or ongoing concerns remain international and/or accented students. While a handful of these cases begin with the student's receipt of a failing grade, most often the circumstances involve a dysfunctional student-supervisor relationship that has recently become almost unbearable for the student. Some of the *most common* types of situations that we hear about from international students include the following:

- The student is provided with no time to work on her own thesis/research because her supervisor requires that she constantly be working on his projects/papers.
- The student researches and writes papers in their entirety (with minimal or no input from the supervisor), and then is either denied or given only limited authorship credit.
- The student is generally ignored by the supervisor, who refuses to provide the level of guidance requested by the student and avoids the student's requests for contact. The student observes that other (often non-international) students under the same supervisor are provided with more attention and support.
- The supervisor regularly speaks to the student in an abusive or threatening manner (either privately or publicly). This may or may not involve obviously discriminatory remarks, such as: "I don't know how things were done in [student's home country], but here you do them my way." This may also include threats to contact the student's home government.

Common to almost all of these typical situations is an overwhelming fear of reprisal on the part of the student if any action is taken to confront the professor, report the abuse, or otherwise address the problem. Indeed, many of the students who have already built up the courage to approach our office with their concerns are nonetheless unwilling to approach their supervisor or department, as they perceive that they will be identified as a trouble-maker and face retaliation through the exercise of their supervisor's (or department's) considerable discretion over them. Unfortunately, this fear is often well-founded and it would be irresponsible for us to advise student's otherwise.

Given these circumstances, the students who choose to take action to address their situation (by speaking directly to their supervisor, approaching their department, or contacting the Human Rights Office) are those who are no longer able to bear their situation and who perceive that things could likely not get any worse.

Often the students who approach us with these stories come with a feeling that things are not quite right, and they want to know whether the treatment they have received is normal and appropriate at a Canadian university, or if something is wrong. This common question underlies what I suspect is the reason that the majority of our major clients are international students. The few faculty members who would tend to mistreat or unfairly exploit their graduate students are able to do so to a much greater extent with international students who are less familiar with the domestic (academic) culture, and are therefore more susceptible to being misled as to the extent of their rights and responsibilities within the university. The effect of this dynamic is accentuated by the increased vulnerability many international students face with respect to their immigration status and funding provided by their home governments. For example, it is not unusual for a student to receive advance funding from a home government, contingent upon degree completion: if the student does not finish the program, in addition to the shame of returning home in failure, the student and her family would be on the hook for all scholarship monies the student had received up to that point –

sometimes over several years.)

Given the level of fear in the international student community with respect to raising concerns or seeking assistance, I think it is reasonable to suspect that the inappropriate treatment experienced by these students in our university is more extensive than even we realize. The question of how to effectively address and remedy this systemic problem is ultimately one for the graduate school and the university administration. Given the university's recent decision to increase the number of both graduate and international students, if these systemic abuses are not properly addressed and eliminated, we will be headed for a crisis. While any public acknowledgement of existing systemic abuses may be temporarily embarrassing for the university, the failure to acknowledge and denounce such practices enables them to continue and will ultimately lead to greater embarrassment when others drag them into the light. It is also important to consider the extent to which the international reputation that Queen's would seek to further develop, is impacted by the actual experiences and stories of international students.

Clearly, the Student Advisor Program has a very important role to play in addressing this situation and improving the circumstances of individual students who seek out our services. It will remain a high priority for our program to provide support and advocacy to individual students who have been mistreated and have made the difficult decision to take action to address their concerns. However, it is ultimately the university administration that bears the responsibility for addressing these issues at a broader institutional level. While some steps have been taken, the urgency of this endeavor is perhaps not fully appreciated.

Thank you for your time and support for this valuable program.