

SGPS Student Advisor Program
Room 203, John Deutsch University Centre
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January 2007

Student Advisor Fall Term Report

Training

This September I spent a significant period of time organizing, planning and preparing for a new Conflict Resolution and Mediation Training course for the Student Advisors. I worked with certified trainers from St. Stephen's House Community Mediation Program to carefully tailor the course to meet the specific needs of the Student Advisors. To justify the cost of bringing trainers from Toronto, the program was also made available to the staff, executive and council representatives of the SGPS.

The training was a resounding success for all involved, and we will recommend that the course we developed be used again in upcoming years. The trainers also exhibited great flexibility in the presentation of the material, and were eager to respond to any concerns that the Advisors raised during the training. Such flexibility suggests that the course would be quite effective in future years, even if the specific priorities of the Student Advisor Program were to change (as perhaps with the turnover of Advisors, SGPS executive, or administrative stakeholders). Given the usefulness of the training program, we will look to holding it earlier in the year in the future (possibly even in the Spring, after the new advisors are hired).

Policy Development

I have taken on most of the responsibility for drafting the internal policy documents of the program. During the Fall term this area of responsibility involved conducting research into the evaluation and rehiring procedures of similar programs at other universities and developing a formal evaluative procedure for the Student Advisors to replace the ad-hoc procedure that was employed last year. This has involved creating a survey to be distributed to program users, developing mechanisms to collect and manage these surveys, as well as refining the evaluative roles to be played by members of the SGPS and the Steering Committee.

I also drafted and refined the proposed Complaint Procedure, to allow for greater Student Advisor accountability and more constructive feedback mechanisms. This policy was approved in principle, although some details still require discussion before receiving final approval.

I have also been working on revising the Memorandum of Agreement to reflect changes in the program (including new policies) and Steering Committee decisions or recommendations.

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Cases and Student Inquiries

Listening to and responding to student inquiries and concerns constitutes the most important part of the Student Advisors' work, and certainly, for me, the most satisfying. My personal caseload has significantly increased, in objective terms, compared to last Fall. However, subjectively, the caseload has been considerably less overwhelming, due to my increased experience and general competence as an Advisor and advocate. I have responded to many typical inquiries of the sort described in my previous three reports, most of which require only a referral or a telephone call or two. This is where I have become most efficient, as I am now far more familiar with the resources and possible solutions available for many common concerns.

Of the more significant cases that have come to the Student Advisor office (that I have had a hand in), the following merit specific mention:

- I assisted a masters student in the Sciences, who felt that s/he was not receiving sufficient guidance or attention from his/her supervisor, by helping the student change supervisors and ensuring that s/he did not lose funding in the process.
- I assisted a masters student in the Humanities in obtaining his/her promised funding, when, after the student failed a course, the Graduate Coordinator illegally attempted to reduce the level of the student's funding.
- I responded to several different PhD students in the Sciences who were concerned that their supervisors were unfairly taking primary credit for the student's own research and analysis. This concern appears to be a rising problem and is likely due to a combination of insufficient advance communication with respect to the various proprietary interests in particular research projects and the lack of enforcement mechanisms to protect graduate students from having their work unfairly appropriated by faculty members (particularly younger faculty, who face constant and often overwhelming demands to publish work).
- I offered assistance to a Masters student in the Humanities who was looking to challenge the jurisdiction of the Graduate Research Ethics Board and the legitimacy of the ethics review process, after the Graduate Coordinator misrepresented her research to the board, and failed to follow proper procedures.
- I assisted another student advisor in a consultative role throughout the Academic Appeal process of three students (four potential appeals) this Fall. So far our efforts on this front have been an overwhelming success for the students involved; the one remaining matter is now out of our hands, as the student has

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retained independent legal counsel. As part of my role in this process, I researched the availability and appropriateness of legal support from Legal Aid Ontario (certificates), Queen's Legal Aid, or the private bar, at various stages of the process (and depending upon the severity of the consequences and the immigration status of the student).

- I assisted a Masters student in the Humanities who failed a core course in negotiating an informal resolution that allowed the student to remain in the program.
- I offered direction and strategic advice to a student in the Sciences who was concerned that the policy whereby many graduate students are funded by RA-ships to make up for any shortfall in other sources of funding, ends up adversely impacting students who receive significant scholarships, because these students (unlike their RA-funded counterparts) will often not qualify for EI parental leave benefits. Eligibility for EI is contingent upon total hours worked within a certain period. While student with scholarships work just as hard and do the same type of work as those who receive their funding primarily through an RA-ship, they are officially deemed not to be working (or working as much) for the purposes of EI.

Funding Challenges

The Student Advisor Program received notice this term of a potential impending funding crisis, as the Faculty of Law declared its intention to phase out its financial support for the program over two years. This has resulted in an increased workload for the program, as (after unsuccessfully attempting to regain the support of the Faculty of Law), in addition to our normal duties, we have been required to pursue other funding possibilities. After several meetings on the issue with the SGPS executive, we have decided that the SGPS will attempt to make up for the funding shortfall. This would involve increasing the program's \$3.00 optional fee to a \$6.00 mandatory fee at the upcoming Winter referendum. Such a dramatic increase will no doubt require a major promotional campaign for the program; work has now begun on that project.

The withdrawal of support by the Faculty of Law has also made us aware of our failure as a program to fully reach out to professional students. Even without the Law School's financial support, the Student Advisor Program, as a program of the SGPS, remains committed to serving professional students and to attempting to more effectively tailor our services and promotional activities to suit the needs of professional students at Queen's.

Advertising and Promotion

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During the early part of the Fall term we distributed our updated posters throughout campus. Work has now begun on a second series of posters that will cover a wider range of issues, including some that would be more relevant specifically to professional students (i.e., issues not related to supervisors). We have also updated the Student Advisor brochure, and I have recently developed a radio advertisement for CFRC.

While the activities of the Coalition Against Accent Discrimination have been greatly reduced due to the fact that it was primarily an initiative of the Student Advisors and we been overloaded with the combination of casework and administrative responsibilities, I have continued to work with Susan Anderson of the International Centre to create a poster that would raise awareness of the issue of accent-based discrimination. A graphic designer has now been selected; work on the poster will begin shortly.

In order to raise our visibility on campus, and particularly among professional students, we will be pursuing a number of promotional strategies. In particular, we would like to actively coordinate our work with the Education Equity Program to more effectively compliment the services that they offer, and to focus on filling the gaps in their mandate. We are also interested in coordinating some of our promotional efforts (e.g., attending first year small sections).

Additionally, we have participated in the International Student Orientation, and we have prepared a workshop for graduate students on the issue of the student/supervisor relationship (how to keep it on track, and what can be done if goes awry).

We expect that the upcoming Winter term will bring the Student Advisor Program's most extensive promotional initiative yet. We continue to appreciate the active and ever-growing support of the SGPS executive, and the ongoing financial support of the SGSR.

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Queens School of Graduate Studies & Research

