

May 30, 2007

## Student Advisor Winter Term Report

This report covers the period between January and April of 2007.

### Program Funding & Promotion

This has been a challenging term for the Student Advisor program. At the end of the previous term we received notice from the Faculty of Law that it intended to considerably reduce its financial support in the coming academic year and to withdraw from the program completely in September of 2008, based on the similar services offered by the Faculty's Education Equity Program. In response to the impending financial crisis faced by the program, the Student Advisors worked closely with members of the SGPS executive and staff to prepare and promote an SGPS referendum question to raise awareness of the program and to increase the program's student fee. We requested and obtained student support for our \$3.00 optional fee to be changed to a \$6.00 mandatory fee, indexed to inflation. We also discussed the possibility of assuming total financial responsibility for the program to ensure long term security, particularly should its remaining funding be threatened in the future. However, we concluded that it would be best to address such a situation only when and if it arises.

We took the process of referendum preparation as an opportunity to quickly update our promotional materials and 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 distributed a new series of posters advertising the program. We also developed a radio advertisement that now plays regularly on campus radio, CFRC 101.9 FM.

At the beginning of January, we created and conducted 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, it would be worthwhile to continue with a variation of this workshop in future years.

Our efforts to raise the profile of the Student Advisor Program this term, while effective, have highlighted the fact that there is still considerable work to be done in this respect. 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 normally functioning at maximum capacity with respect to the number of ongoing files we are able to handle effectively. While we would be able to manage an increase in inquiries requiring only summary advice or referrals, any increase in the number of larger cases, requiring ongoing advisor participation, would be difficult for the program to handle at current capacity.

Another aspect of our referendum campaign that is worth mentioning, is the overwhelming outpouring of support from former clients of the program (particularly those who had long and difficult cases). While the Student Advisor Program (and, in particular, one advisor) has been subject to a significant backlash from some individual faculty members and administrators, the program (and, especially, this particular advisor) continues to receive outstanding testimonials from our clients.

## **Policy Development**

My work this term has been dominated by drafting the program's policy documents. I have spent many hours researching, consulting, writing, meeting, negotiating, editing, revising and presenting policy documents for approval.

During the Winter term I revised and finalized the evaluations and rehiring policies for the program. This involved distributing a survey to all program users, and establishing the procedure by which surveys are collected and analyzed. We also contacted all members of the SGPS by email to make any previous clients aware of the survey, and the procedure for completing and submitting it.

In my Fall term report, I stated that I had "drafted and refined the proposed Complaint Procedure, to allow for greater Student Advisor accountability and more constructive feedback mechanisms," noting that the policy was awaiting final approval from the SGSR. Unfortunately, after many more hours working on the policy, multiple meetings with the Associate Deans of the SGSR, submitting the policy the Human Rights Office for review and extensive revisions, and having it further reviewed by the Coordinator of Dispute Resolution Mechanisms, there is no change to report on the status of this policy. It is my understanding that a new series of proposed revisions will be tabled shortly.

Revisions to the Memorandum of Agreement for the Student Advisor Program also consumed a considerable number of my work hours this term. This document was also the subject of multiple lengthy meetings with the Associate Deans of the SGSR, at which extensive revisions were recommended. While the last round of these revisions were completed and submitted several months ago, it is my understanding that this document has also yet to be approved by the SGSR, and will be subject to further requests for revision.

## Cases and Student Inquiries

While my caseload decreased somewhat this term due to my increased responsibilities in the area of policy development and our promotional efforts, contact with students remains the most rewarding aspect of my work. However, I continue to be shocked and disappointed by the level of harassment and emotional abuse that is suffered by (almost entirely accented international) students at the hands of some graduate supervisors. While we refer most of these students to the Human Rights Office, in many cases there is little the HRO can do to assist them because there is often no evidentiary basis upon which to believe that the harassment is based upon a prohibited ground of discrimination. Nonetheless, whatever its origin, the emotional abuse or unfair treatment experienced by these students is very real. Our office is, apparently, a last resort; generally, they come to us when their relationships to their supervisors have deteriorated to the point that they can no longer cope without active support.

My experience this year has led me to the conclusion that if the matter is not capable of quick resolution at the lowest, informal level (with the supervisor or graduate coordinator), the student may have little recourse outside an eventual resort to formal mechanisms, where concerns of fairness are foremost. However, we continue to guide a student through all intermediate steps, meeting with department heads and the Associate Deans of the SGSR. Unfortunately, it has been my experience that members of the administration will almost always support the faculty member in the dispute, regardless of the circumstances or the strength of the student's case.

It was my expectation that the administration, particularly the Associate Deans of the SGSR, would take a more balanced view and would support students when there were clear-cut cases of inappropriate behaviour by faculty members or blatant derogations from departmental procedures or Senate policies. I had hoped that, in such cases, the SGSR would be equally committed to advocating for a fair process and would be willing to support those students whose interests had been adversely impacted by such derogations. This might involve putting (limited) pressure on the faculty member to (for example) reconsider his/her decision, correct a procedural error, or agree to appropriate alternative arrangements.

Instead, my experience shows that the Associate Deans of the SGSR will more often advise the student to withdraw voluntarily and/or suggest that their claim/case/appeal has no merit. This has led to an increasing level of hostility among the administration of the SGSR towards the Student Advisor Program, because while the SGSR may tell the student she should abandon her claim, we may tell the same student that her claim has merit, and that we will support her choice to pursue it if she wishes. Indeed, students we have assisted have been successful in advancing their legitimate concerns at a

formal level after being advised by an Associate Dean of the SGSR that their positions do not have merit.

Clearly, in so far as the Student Advisor Program has been successful in helping some of these students to advance their legitimate claims, it has also clearly created headaches for some faculty members and administrators. No doubt, the program has thereby put itself in some danger. Perhaps, critics of the Student Advisors believe that we recommend that every student press their case to the fullest, regardless of its chances of success or its relative merit. This is not the case. There are many students whom we advise that while they could choose to appeal a decision, they would almost certainly lose. Even people who clearly have been wronged, we must often advise that, while they are right to feel upset, there is no remedy for their situation.

It is my sincere hope that those who have power over the existence and mandate of the program will appreciate that our role in assisting students facing mistreatment from their supervisors is a valuable one, despite the headaches, and that there are times when such students may require an active advocate. The other option (i.e., eliminating the program, or gutting its advocacy mandate) effectively sanctions the abuse of the most marginal population of graduate students: those who are unable to navigate the procedures on their own or articulate their concerns in a manner that allows them to be taken seriously. While the voluntary and quiet withdrawal of such persons from the University would considerably minimize headaches all around, it would not be in the interests of the students, the interests of fairness, or in accordance with the values for which Queen's University stands.

Despite the considerable abuses that already take place to the detriment of this university's most vulnerable international graduate students, the situation could be worse. Perhaps, if the small minority of faculty members responsible for such mistreatment had a greater appreciation of the extent to which upper levels of administration were willing to back them in the face of legitimate student complaints, the unfair treatment suffered by international graduate students might be more extensive. I am certain that the situation would be considerably worse if not for the Student Advisor Program, and its ongoing support for students in these difficult circumstances. This is evident from the testimonials of the many students we have successfully assisted.

## **Recommendations**

Given the level of hostility currently directed toward the Student Advisors by one of the program's key stake-holders, I understand that my recommendations may not be seriously considered. That said, I sincerely believe that any attempt to reduce the ability of the Student Advisor Program to advocate on behalf of students with legitimate claims, even when their interests or position may be opposed to that of a faculty member or

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administrator, would be a disservice to graduate students and would render the most vulnerable students even more vulnerable. I think it would likewise be a mistake to compromise the independence of the Student Advisor Program by submitting it to the management of the School of Graduate Studies and Research. Such direct management (even co-management) would undercut our credibility with students and could cause us to be viewed with suspicion. Direct management of the Advisors by the program's administrative partners would hamper our ability to effectively advise or advocate on behalf of students when their interests come into conflict with the administration's position on the matter.

I would also strongly recommend against any policy that is designed to undermine our institutional memory and thereby our institutional competence, for example, the oft-proposed two-year limit to the number of years a Student Advisor can be rehired. Every year in this position, one becomes a more effective advisor: common problems are resolved more quickly; referrals are given and questions answered without the need for extensive research; self-advocacy strategies and informal resolution techniques are improved. As I have previously recommended on several other occasions, the creation of a permanent Student Advisor position would greatly improve the functioning of the program. A term-limit would only serve to undermine the program's ability to effectively support and advise graduate and professional students.

Thank you for your continued support for this valuable program.