
Student Advisor Annual Report – 2007 / 2008

Introduction

There have been several significant developments in the Student Advisor Program this year. One significant change involves the nature of our term and annual reports. During the fall of 2007, the SGSR and the SGPS successfully negotiated a revised Memorandum of Agreement for the Student Advisor Program, which altered the reporting requirements towards a more focussed and statistical analysis. Unfortunately, as this change occurred mid-term and required the development of methods to record the desired information, it was not possible to implement the new reporting approach until the winter term. The timing of this change also makes it impossible to provide complete and accurate statistics for the academic year in this report. What I have done instead, is to provide the required statistical information for the summer term as if this was a “term report”, rather than the annual report. Our information gathering system is now fully standardized and operational, and proper annual statistics will be available at the conclusion of the academic year 2008-2009, and thereafter.

It is important to note that each of the three Advisors independently draft their term and annual reports based on their own experiences serving students. The statistical information provided below does not reflect all students served by the program this summer, but only those that I served directly.

By prior arrangement with my co-Advisors I worked significantly increased hours over the fall and winter terms, with the understanding that I would only be available for essential activities (e.g., meetings with the executive or SGSR) and emergencies, or for consultation by other Advisors. This arrangement was made to accommodate my desire to engage in full-time employment during the summer, and also suited the other Advisors' busy fall and winter schedules. Under this arrangement, I was relieved of office hours and email first-response duties for the summer term. This meant that I had minimal direct contact with students using the program. The small handful of new cases that I handled either were assumed at the very end of the term (as other advisors were imminently departing), or involved a student who new me personally. Please bear this in mind, when examining the paucity of cases I dealt with this summer.

In accordance with the criteria for the Term Report set out in the Memorandum of Agreement, please find below an account of the following for the summer term:

1. Statistics on number of cases, including a distinction between new and continuing cases
 2. Statistics on types of cases
 3. Statistics on offices to which referrals were made or from which information was provided
 4. Description of follow-up taken
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1. Statistics on number of cases (Summer Term only)

- 7 students total
- 4 new cases (2 potentially ongoing)
- 3 continuing cases (carried over from winter term)

2. Statistics on types of cases (Summer Term only)

- One case involved TA/RA employment issues
- One case involved medical leave
- One case involved housing issues
- Four cases involved conflicts/miscommunications with a supervisor or administrator

3. Statistics on offices to which referrals were made (including discussed or suggested as options) or from which information was provided (Summer Term only)

- Department office/website: 3
- Dept head/grad coordinator: 2
- Health, Counseling and Disability Services: 2
- Human Rights Office: 1
- SGSR (deans/registrar/staff/website): 4
- Student Awards: 1
- Other Student Advisors: 2
- Coordinator of Dispute Resolution Mechanisms: 1
- Queen's Legal Aid: 1
- SGPS: 1
- Private lawyer: 1

Description of follow-up taken (Summer Term only):

- Only one case this summer involved significant follow-up, consisting of two in-person meetings, a telephone call, and about 6 emails. The situation involved a conflict with a supervisor and department. This student was self-advocating at all times, and although I was kept apprised of the student's situation, I assisted only in an informational and emotional support capacity. This student eventually retained a lawyer and no longer requires our services; I am unaware of how the matter was resolved.

I would reiterate here my observation from my Winter Term Report, that our program's policy of promoting self-advocacy results in the Student Advisors not finding out how many of the cases we deal with are finally resolved. Students who meet with us are given initial advice and this usually involves working out a plan for how they will address their problem in the immediate future. I would then tell them to feel free to contact me, at any point, should further problems arise or they feel they could use additional support. I also mention that they should feel free to send an email, if they want to, just to let me know when the situation is successfully resolved. Few students have ever done this, unless I have met with them multiple times and formed a relationship; I usually only hear from a student again if further difficulties do indeed arise and they need more extensive assistance.

Recommendations:

Unlike the above statistical information, these recommendations respond to both my direct experience with students using the program, and my discussions with the other advisors regarding cases they have had this year.

- **TA/TF issues:** as I noted in my last term report, this year has seen an increase in student concerns about their rights and responsibilities as TAs, RAs and TFs. While many of the potential institutional safeguards that one would expect might protect university employees are non-existent for student employed in these capacities, others that have been adopted at the level of Graduate School policy do not appear to be consistently implemented at the department level.

The failure of departments or individual faculty member to implement or behave in accordance with SGSR or Senate "policies" has been a recurring theme in my three years as a Student Advisor. From what I can see, the difficulty lies in the lack of effective enforcement mechanisms. This would appear to be a consequence of both the University's collegial governance structure, with its deep respect for departmental and individual autonomy, and the formidable (and understandable) resistance of QUFA to any new policy that could involve disciplinary consequence for its members. I would suggest that the ability of the administration to effectively balance the legitimate interests of graduate students and faculty is hampered by the asymmetrical degree of organization and resulting institutional power imbalance between faculty and TAs/RAs/TFs. In this light, I think the SGSR should welcome the immanent possibility of a TA/TF union, as a counterweight to QUFA, that would facilitate more effective and consistent implementation of policies related to graduate student employment.

As it stands now, TAs we counsel often feel helpless and are afraid to speak out about their concerns because they fear they may lose funding or damage their relationship with their department, which could threaten their career prospects. These fears are often well-founded. Others have come to us after they have already raised concerns or challenges with their department or faculty member and are now facing retaliation (personal or funding-related) for their decision to do so. It would seem to me that a peace maintained by fear of retaliation is less preferable, for the academic culture of a University in the 21st century, to a peace maintained by clearly defined roles and accountability based upon an institutional balance of power achieved through collective bargaining.

Some of the most common TA issues that we have dealt with this year include:

- Lack of a TA contract
- Impossible to complete assigned work in hours allotted
- Mis/non-communication of expectations or job requirements
- The extent to which acceptance of TA-ship is voluntary, and the impact of refusing one on other departmental funding

- Ability of students to accept TA-ships from other departments, and the potential impact on their home-department funding
 - Fractional TA-ships (i.e., ½ or ¼ TA-ships)
 - Availability beyond fourth year of a PhD
 - Employment Insurance eligibility
 - Medical/parental leave issues
- **Workplace harassment of graduate students:** Workplace harassment of graduate students that is not based (or with out a sound evidentiary basis for alleging that it is based) on a prohibited ground of discrimination remains an ongoing problem at Queen's. I have discussed this problem in many previous reports, including my winter term report, and we met with Associate Dean David Rappaport this summer to specifically discuss this issue.

As I observed in my winter term report and discussed with Dr. Rappaport, there are currently no remedies available to students who are harassed by their supervisors or fellow graduate students, unless that harassment can be framed in Human Rights terms. The same is not true for faculty, who, through QUFA, have a policy protecting them against workplace harassment (it is also my understanding that QUFA is negotiating a policy that would protect faculty from harassment by students).

International students less familiar with the academic culture of Queen's are particularly vulnerable to bullying and other forms of harassment by persons in authority. There is a great and urgent need for a generalized and enforced grievance policy and procedure to ensure that graduate students are free to pursue their work and studies in an environment free from psychological abuse and exploitation. Unfortunately, given the present power imbalance, discussed above in the context of TA issues, the creation of an effective and enforceable policy would depend entirely on the support of the faculty association. Alternatively, such a policy could be negotiated as part of a potential collective agreement between Queen's and TA/TFs. However, it is important to realize that this harassment often takes place in the RA context, and that there is currently no effort to organize RAs on campus. Research regarding the policies of other universities responding to this problem would be useful to all concerned, and should perhaps be pursued by the SGPS, and/or through the Canadian Federation of Students.

- **Access to funding beyond the fourth year:** It should come as no surprise that this issue remains one of the primary concerns of graduate students who use the program. This general problem is disproportionately borne by international students, who have far less access to the typical financial resources accessed by domestic students when their funding runs out (such as bank loans). When we held a workshop for international graduate students in January, of the approximately 20 people who attended, all but one came to raise concerns about access to funding.

Unfortunately, it seems that Queen's is pressing ahead in the wrong direction on this issue. The existing situation will no doubt be exacerbated by the new tuition increase, which is also designed, in real terms, to be disproportionately borne by international students. The recent decision to require international students to continue to pay

international fees beyond the fourth year is similarly regressive, and fails to take into account the lack of financial resources available to many international students. While we would welcome the decision to grand-parent in international students presently in their fifth year, I would suggest that, at minimum, all those students now at Queen's – who potentially attended Queen's with knowledge of and in reliance on this policy – should be exempted as well.

- **Program Awareness:** I dealt with this issue at length in my Winter Term report. Since then the SGPS and the Student Advisors have put considerable effort into increasing the program's visibility among graduate students. If the number of students contacting the program during the first weeks of September is any indication, this effort appears to be paying off. Continuation of these efforts remains a priority for the program and the SGPS executive.