

Student Advisor Fall Term Report – 2008/2009

Introduction

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 fall, but only those that I served directly.

By prior arrangement with my co-Advisors, I have been working significantly increased hours during the fall and winter terms, with the understanding that I will be completing my final term as a Student Advisor at the end of April 2009. Please bear this in mind, if it appears that I dealt with a greater number of students this term than my colleagues. We make every effort to share responsibilities equally among the Advisors over the course of the year, but this often involves bearing relatively increased or reduced workloads at any given time.

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 Fall term:

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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

- 28 cases total
- 25 new cases (2 ongoing)
- 3 continuing/reopened cases (carried over from a previous term)

2. Statistics on types of cases

(Note: total number exceeds number of cases because some cases involve multiple issues)

- 8 cases involved conflicts with a supervisor or faculty member
- 4 cases involved supervisor/program change
- 4 cases involved housing issues
- 4 cases involved potential human rights issues

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- 3 cases involved non-discriminatory harassment
- 3 cases involved intellectual property issues
- 3 cases involved funding challenges
- 2 cases involved TA/RA employment issues
- 2 cases involved possible email harassment
- 2 cases involved a disputed grade
- 1 case involved a conflict re lab responsibilities
- 1 case involved part-time status issues
- 1 case involved medical leave
- 1 case involved immigration issues
- 1 case involved a conflict re use of a listserv

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

- Dept head/grad coordinator: 10
- SGSR (deans/registrar/staff/website): 7
- Department office/website: 6
- Coordinator of Dispute Resolution Mechanisms: 5
- SGPS: 5
- Human Rights Office: 4
- Health, Counseling and Disability Services: 3
- Student Awards: 3
- Queen's Legal Aid: 3
- Other Student Advisors: 3
- Apartment & Housing Services: 2
- Legal Aid Ontario/Lawyer Referral Service: 2
- International Centre: 2
- Town Gown: 2
- Kingston Immigrant Services: 1
- City Councillor: 1
- Ban Righ Centre: 1
- Chaplin's Office: 1
- Queen's Website: 1
- Government Office: 1
- AMS: 1

Description of follow-up taken:

- Most cases (about 20) involved some or all of the following:
 - Online research
 - Contacting an admin/staff/SGPS person to ask general questions on behalf of an anonymous student
 - Providing information, strategic advice or communication skills coaching
- Four cases involved multiple in-person meetings with the student concerned. All of these matters were resolved to the students' satisfaction.

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- Only one case this term required my direct intervention, although I acted in a consultative capacity for several other cases where Advisors directly intervened. This case involved a grade dispute, and a possible recommendation to withdraw. The matter was resolved in the student's favour at step two of the SGSR's academic appeal policy.
- Three cases are potentially ongoing. In one, I have agreed to research some specific questions, and respond to the student in the New Year. In another, the student has sought my assistance, but has yet to provide me the details of his/her situation. The last one is a complex and multifaceted case that has lasted several years and involves many parties; I am the secondary Advisor in this case.

As I have mentioned in previous reports, 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:

- **Workplace harassment of graduate students:** As I mentioned in several previous reports, the lack of protection for students from non-discriminatory harassment remains a major problem. The failure to protect students from such treatment effectively sanctions the abuse of graduate students. While the faculty collective agreement prohibits workplace harassment, its provisions cannot be invoked by students. The University needs to develop procedures for addressing and deterring workplace harassment of and by any member of the Queen's community.
- **Intellectual property standards:** Authorship issues remain a major concern for graduate students across disciplines. These concerns remain very difficult to resolve given the lack of standards at the departmental level. Everyone knows that authorship conventions differ by discipline and department, but the uncritical support of faculty members in such disputes by all levels of administration facilitates exploitation of the student/supervisor relationship and potentially undermines the academic integrity of the institution. Graduate students need access to fair, unambiguous, publicly available, written standards of the authorship conventions that apply to their work. I would recommend that the SGSR propose a default

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policy for authorship, and allow each department to opt-out of that policy by promulgating their own written policy.

- **Access to funding beyond the fourth year:** This issue remains one of the primary concerns of graduate students who contact us. As I have noted previously, this 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). Several international graduate students approaching their fifth year contacted the program this term for advice and assistance. Unfortunately, there is little we can do for students in this situation other than to make them aware of various resources, from bursary assistance through Student Awards to emergency help from the Chaplin's office or the AMS foodbank.

While domestic students are usually able to muddle through such difficulties by assuming crushing debt loads, it is unclear what the University expects international students – who do not generally qualify for loans – to do in this situation. It seems both unfortunate and absurd for the University to partially subsidize the first four years of an international student's PhD only to force them out in the fifth year, particularly when the average time to completion in some departments remains abysmally high.

- **Program Awareness:** This has been an important issue as long as I have been an Advisor. The SGPS strives to raise awareness about the program among its membership through council, monthly news letters, advertising, and its orientation materials. Our capacity to educate faculty about the services provided by the program is more limited, and any assistance the SGSR can offer in this area would be much appreciated.

Many students who do come to us have been referred by faculty members or heads in departments where we have been previously involved in extended and high-profile disputes. As such, we continue to receive a disproportionate number of our cases from a relatively small number of departments. While this may suggest that these are “problem departments” in terms of graduate student experience, it may also reflect a reduced awareness of our program in the university at large.